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Tearmoon Empire
MANGA: Mizu Morino ✦ ORIGINAL WORK: Nozomu Mochitsuki ✦ CHARACTER DESIGNS: Gilse

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Tearmoon Empire

Chapter 19

THE DAY AFTER THE SWORDS-MANSHIP TOURNAMENT WAS CALLED OFF ON ACCOUNT OF RAIN...

...MIA, WHO'D BEEN SOAKED TO HER SKIN...

UUUGH.

PANT

PANT

PANT

UUUGGGH...

...WAS BEDRIDDEN WITH A COLD.

PRINCESS MIA, PLEASE! WE HAVE TO DRY YOUR HAIR!

IS IT JUST ME...

...OR IS THE WATER BRINGING OUT MY TRUE BEAUTY?

BECAUSE SHE BROUGHT IT UPON HERSELF.

MY...!

UGGGH...

HOW DID IT COME TO THIS?

WHEEZE

HAH...

SILENCE...

ANNE...?

ARE YOU THERE, ANNE?

...?

HAAAH...

OH, YES.

I REMEMBER THIS...

IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE...

...MIA'S MAID-IN-WAITING WAS THE THIRD DAUGHTER OF A POWERFUL NOBLE FAMILY.

SHE HAD ALWAYS BEEN MIA'S FAVORITE. AND YET...

♪

YOU'RE INCREDIBLE, PRINCESS MIA!

OHO HO HO

I RECALL SOMEONE REVEALING TO ME LATER...

...THAT SHE LEFT TO HAVE TEA WITH HER ATTENDANT FRIENDS.

PRINCESS MIA?

I SNUCK OUT AFTER SHE FELL ASLEEP.

NO WAY AM I CATCHING HER COLD!

ぽつ～ん...
ALONE

HAH

HAS THIS ROOM...

...

...ALWAYS BEEN SO LARGE?

...DY!

...LADY!

SHAKE

MILADY!

BWEH?

TURN

HM? OH, SO THEN...

...THAT WAS ALL A DREAM?

AH...

ANNE...

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, MILADY?!

...

WHEW...

IT'S MY ROOM. THE SAME AS EVER.

AH!

FWIP

I'M ALL RIGHT! NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT.

MILADY MIA!

YOU WERE CRYING OUT IN YOUR SLEEP...

PHEW

THANK GOOD-NESS...

I'M AS HEALTHY AS COULD BE! DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME!

THUMP

YOU SHOULD STAY AWAY.

WE WOULDN'T WANT YOU TO CATCH MY COLD.

HAVE YOU BEEN HERE THIS WHOLE TIME, ANNE?

WHAT ARE YOU SAYING, MILADY?!

HARRUMPH!

STOP FRETTING AND JUST LET YOURSELF REST FOR NOW.

OKAY?

DRIFT

THE CLOTH FEELS SO NICE AND COOL...

HAAH

THANK YOU...

...ANNE...

THERE SHE IS, PRINCESS MIA!

LOOK! SHE'S READING BY HERSELF AGAIN.

MY!

IS SHE, NOW?

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF HER, PRINCESS MIA?

HER NAME'S CHLOE, THEY SAY.

THEY ALSO SAY SHE *BOUGHT* HER TITLE!

I CAN'T BELIEVE THE ACADEMY WOULD LET SOMEONE LIKE HER IN!

Right?

SNICKER

SNICKER

CLENCH

...

TURN

I DON'T SEE WHAT YOU FIND SO INTER-ESTING ABOUT HER.

Oh, my!

THEY SAY HE'S A COMMONER AS WELL, BUT HE'S EVER SO HANDSOME...

MORE IMPORTANTLY, HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT PRINCE SION'S ATTENDANT?

ARE YOU AWAKE?

AH, PRINCESS MIA!

ANOTHER DREAM?

CHLOE...?

SHOW OFF

IT'S A SORT OF MASK! IT HELPS KEEP COLDS FROM SPREADING.

LEAVE IT TO A WEALTHY MERCHANT'S DAUGHTER TO KNOW THESE THINGS...

WHAT... IS THAT?

OH, THIS?

ON YOUR MOUTH?

PRINCESS MIA?

IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO FOR YOU?

MAYBE YOU'D LIKE SOMETHING TO EAT?

AH, ANNE WENT OUT TO FETCH SOME FRESH WATER.

!ばっ FWSH

OH, AND I BROUGHT SOME COLD MEDICINE THAT MY FATHER SENT ME A WHILE AGO!

BE SURE TO TAKE IT LATER.

...

CHLOE...

I'M AFRAID...

...I OWE YOU AN APOLOGY.

BLANK STARE

HUH...?

BACK THEN, WHEN I SAW YOU SUFFERING, I CHOSE TO IGNORE IT.

WORSE STILL, I'D FORGOTTEN ALL ABOUT IT, UP TO THIS VERY DAY.

...

UMM.

I'M SO TERRIBLY SORRY.

HEE HEE

WAS THAT A DREAM YOU HAD OR SOMETHING?

A DREAM...

YES. PERHAPS IT WAS.

PERHAPS NONE OF THAT REALLY HAPPENED AT ALL.

NEVERTHE-LESS...

YOU KNOW...

I ENJOYED MAKING SANDWICHES WITH YOU, OF COURSE...

EVER SINCE YOU BECAME MY FRIEND, I'VE BEEN HAVING SO MUCH FUN, PRINCESS MIA.

BUT MORE THAN THAT, I'VE ALWAYS DREAMED OF HAVING A FRIEND I COULD TALK ABOUT STORIES WITH.

SO, PLEASE, THERE'S NOTHING YOU NEED TO APOLOGIZE FOR.

COULD YOU...

...TELL ME A STORY, PERHAPS?

HUH?

ALL RIGHT, THEN.

Heh...

LET'S SEE.

I KNOW JUST THE ONE...

YOU ASKED IF YOU COULD DO SOMETHING FOR ME.

IF YOU'VE READ ANY INTERESTING STORIES LATELY...

...COULD YOU TELL ME ONE?

!

DRIFT...

ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE LIVED A LONESOME GIRL.

SHE WAS TERRIBLY SHY, SPENDING EACH AND EVERY DAY IN SOLITUDE.

UNTIL ONE DAY, OUT OF THE BLUE, SOMEONE BURST INTO HER LIFE, OFFERED HER A HAND, AND ASKED TO BE HER FRIEND.

THAT PERSON'S NAME...

THE LAST DAY BEFORE SUMMER IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE.

MY FATHER WOULD LOVE TO MEET WITH YOU IN PERSON, PRINCESS MIA!

AS WOULD MINE!

MAY I HAVE THE HONOR OF PAYING MY RESPECTS TO YOU AND HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY THIS SUMMER?

NO, YOU SIMPLY ***MUST*** VISIT OUR KINGDOM!

SMALL AS IT IS, IT MAKES FOR A WONDERFUL SUMMER RETREAT...

CHATTER

Mine as well!

CHATTER

Please!

YES, WELL...

I SUPPOSE I SHALL HAVE TO THINK ABOUT IT...

GLANCE

WELL, THEN.

TAKE CARE ON THE ROAD, LADY TIONA.

THANK YOU! I WILL.

SNAP

WHYEVER ISN'T PRINCE SION COMING TO SAY GOODBYE TO ME?

GLANCE

Princess Mia!

Visit us!

GLANCE

Please!

GLARE

?

OH!

HE MUST FEEL AWKWARD ABOUT TURNING DOWN MY LUNCHBOX!

DING!

IS SOMETHING THE MATTER WITH HIM?

UNTIL THE FIRES OF REVOLUTION BEGAN TO BLAZE...

...MIA REMAINED OBLIVIOUS TO THE SENTIMENTS OF SION AND TIONA.

DOES HE REALLY THINK I'D HOLD THAT AGAINST HIM? HOW SILLY!

IN FACT, SHE DIDN'T EVEN SEE WHAT THE GIRLS IN HER OWN RETINUE WERE THINKING.

THE OTHER IMPERIAL NOBLES WERE IN NO POSITION TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO SCHOOL.

HER CLASSMATES SAW HER AS THE PRINCESS OF A FAILING EMPIRE—IN OTHER WORDS, A NUISANCE—AND AVOIDED HER.

A FEW YEARS LATER, THE EMPIRE'S FINANCES BEGAN TO COLLAPSE, AND VIOLENT RIOTS WERE SPREADING.

MIA WAS LEFT TRULY AND UNDENIABLY ALONE.

HOW DID IT COME TO THIS?

AH!

PRINCESS MIA.

PRINCE SION...

EXPLAIN SOME-THING TO ME.

HUH...?

WHY IS IT...

...THAT YOU NEVER SO MUCH AS *TRY* TO EMPATHIZE WITH THOSE AROUND YOU?

AT THE VERY LEAST, KNOW THIS.

I DESPISE YOU...

...PRINCESS MIA.

AH!

HYA AAH!

FWUMP

FSH

IT...

...WAS A DREAM.

HAH

AH...

IT WAS, WASN'T IT...?

DRIP

THANK YOU. I NEEDED THAT.

Phew...

YOU'RE VERY WELCOME.

GLUG GLUG

BWAH

BRUSH

YOU WERE REALLY TOSSING AND TURNING, THOUGH.

AH... THIS FEELS SO NICE AND COOL...

WERE YOU HAVING A NIGHTMARE?

P—

P—

PRINCE ABEL!

BRUSH

BRUSH

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

KER-

GYAAA AAAH!!!

FLUMP

I KNEW I SHOULDN'T BE WATCHING A LADY SLEEP...

OH, SORRY.

LIVID

YOU ARE HELPING IN ALL THE WRONG WAYS, ANNE!

...BUT MISS ANNE ASKED ME TO.

SHE SAID TO WATCH OVER YOU WHILE SHE WAS OUT.

Go for it!

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMING TO SEE ME.

I WOULDN'T WANT YOU TO CATCH MY COLD, THOUGH...

PERHAPS YOU'D BE BETTER OFF GOING ON YOUR WAY?

TUG

ACTUALLY, IT MIGHT BE FOR THE BEST IF I GOT SICK.

HUH?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

IF CATCHING YOUR COLD WOULD CURE YOU, I COULDN'T ASK FOR ANYTHING BETTER.

HA HA

OH, WELL...

WHERE I COME FROM, THEY SAY YOU'LL GET OVER A COLD IF SOMEONE ELSE CATCHES IT FROM YOU.

FLUSH

MY...

OH, PRINCE ABEL...

OHO HO

COME TO THINK OF IT, IT'S ALMOST TIME FOR SUMMER VACATION.

OH, THAT'S RIGHT.

I'M GUESSING YOU'LL BE GOING BACK TO THE EMPIRE?

YES, I WILL.

I HAVE A LOT TO DO BACK HOME.

I'LL BE STAYING THERE UNTIL SCHOOL STARTS AGAIN.

OH, I SEE...

A LONG VACATION IS NO EXCUSE TO SIT AROUND AND DAWDLE.

CLENCH

BZZZ

BZZZ

BZZZ

BZZZ

BZZZ

To Do

I MUST DO EVERYTHING I POSSIBLY CAN TO SAVE MYSELF FROM THE GUILLO-TINE!

I'LL BE GOING HOME TOO, FOR A TIME...

BUT I'LL BE COMING BACK TO THE ACADEMY A LITTLE EARLY.

WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS, PRINCE ABEL?

DROOP

IT'S A SHAME.

I WAS HOPING TO SPEND SOME TIME WITH YOU THEN, BUT I SUPPOSE THAT'S NOT HAPPENING.

BMP BMP BMP

HOW DOES HE SAY THESE THINGS WITH A STRAIGHT FACE? MY POOR HEART...

?

!

BA-DMP

PRINCE SION AND LADY TIONA SAID THEY'D BE COMING BY TO SEE YOU.

MY!

WHO COULD THAT BE?

OH, THAT'S RIGHT!

KNOCK KNOCK

HM?

IT SEEMS I'M QUITE POPULAR TODAY.

REALLY, NOW!

*THE COLD WAS BAD ENOUGH **WITHOUT** HAVING THEM TO DEAL WITH...*

OHO HO

WHY WAS I JUST SMILING OVER MY SWORN ENEMIES VISITING ME?

...?

CLACK

EXCUSE US.

HM?

I BROUGHT YOU SOME-THING, PRINCESS MIA!

THIS IS MEDICINE MY FAMILY SENT ME.

MY YOUNGER BROTHER MADE IT FROM HERBS HE GREW, SO IT'S NOTHING FANCY, BUT I HOPE IT HELPS...

HOW ARE YOU FEELING?

...

I WASN'T ALL THAT UPSET ABOUT THEIR ARRIVAL...

I SEE NOW.

A WARM, PLEASANT ATMOSPHERE FILLED THE ROOM.

IT WAS A MOMENT OF PEACE...

...THE LIKES OF WHICH MIA COULD NEVER HAVE HOPED TO EXPERIENCE IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE.

...BECAUSE MY HEAD'S NICE AND CLEAR FROM ALL THE SLEEP I'VE BEEN GETTING!

That's it!

Tearmoon Empire

Chapter 20

SUMMER VACATION ARRIVED FOR THE STUDENTS OF SAINT-NOEL...

CLUNK

THUNK

...AND MIA FOUND HERSELF EN ROUTE TO THE EMPIRE.

FLIP

HMMM.

THE FUTURE WRITTEN IN MY DIARY SHOULD BE CHANGING ANY DAY NOW.

OR SO I THOUGHT, BUT...

THE EMPIRE FALLS VICTIM TO A FAMINE, THEN A REVOLUTION, AND THE IMPERIAL FAMILY FALLS TO RUIN.

FINALLY, I'M SENT TO THE GUILLOTINE.

NONE OF THAT HAS CHANGED AT ALL.

NO SUCH LUCK.

I SUPPOSE I SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISED...

SIGH

IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE, THE MASSES WERE UNITED IN OPPOSITION TO THE IMPERIAL FAMILY.

NOW, HOWEVER, A SMALL VOLUNTARY MILITIA MOSTLY MADE UP OF NEW-MOON DISTRICT RESIDENTS IS SAID TO HAVE RISEN UP TO DEFEND THEM.

We'll save Princess Mia together!

Yeah!

THAT SAID...

IT SEEMS THERE *HAVE* BEEN SOME MINOR SHIFTS HERE AND THERE.

THE MILITIA IS FIGHTING IN CONCERT WITH THE IMPERIAL GUARD AND HAS DEALT CONSIDERABLE DAMAGE TO THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMY.

EVEN ASIDE FROM THOSE WHO FIGHT FOR ME, IT SEEMS A FAIR NUMBER OF THE COMMON FOLK HAVE CALLED FOR MY LIFE TO BE SPARED.

THE HEAD CHEF WAS KIND ENOUGH TO PROVIDE ME WITH DECENT MEALS, AS WELL.

PLUS, MY LODGINGS HAVE CHANGED.

INSTEAD OF AN UNDERGROUND DUNGEON, I WAS KEPT IN ONE OF THE CASTLE'S ROOMS.

HOW VERY APT...

"THE AMBERMOON TOMATO STEW WAS EXQUISITE.

I WAS EVEN TREATED TO A FINAL FEAST THE NIGHT BEFORE MY EXECUTION...

THANKS IN PART TO AN APPEAL BY HIS ATTENDANT...

AND THEN THERE'S HOW IT DESCRIBES PRINCE SION...

TO THINK! PRINCE SION, OF ALL THE PEOPLE...

...HE MADE AN EFFORT TO OPPOSE MY EXECUTION.

ANNE ATTEMPTED TO RESCUE MIA FROM CONFINEMENT—AN EFFORT THAT ENDED IN FAILURE.

SHE WAS CAPTURED AND IMPRISONED, RESULTING IN THE BREAKUP OF HER FAMILY.

Ah!

IT MENTIONS ANNE AND PRINCE ABEL AS WELL!

HOW-EVER...

ABEL ATTEMPTED TO SAVE HER, MANAGING TO SNEAK ACROSS THE TEARMOON BORDER.

WORD OF HIS FATE HAS JUST REACHED ME.

HE FOUGHT TOOTH AND NAIL TO BREAK THROUGH THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMY, BUT IN THE END...

...

RELATIONS WITH THE KINGDOM OF REMNO PROCEEDED TO WORSEN, PLUNGING THE EMPIRE INTO FURTHER HARDSHIP...

SHAKE SHAKE

THIS...

...CERTAINLY WASN'T AN ENJOYABLE READ.

IT SEEMS THE STOCKPILES I INSTRUCTED LUDWIG TO AMASS DID SOME GOOD, AT LEAST...

...BUT STILL NOWHERE NEAR ENOUGH TO PREVENT A SHORTAGE.

THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE REVOLUTION REMAINS UNCHANGED: THE FAMINE.

A REGIONAL CONFLICT BROKE OUT ON THE BORDER...

...BETWEEN THE EMPIRE AND A MINORITY TRIBE OF FOREST-DWELLERS KNOWN AS THE LULUS.

110

FLIP

NOT TO MENTION...

I DO BELIEVE THAT CONFLICT MAY HAVE OCCURRED LAST TIME TOO.

I BARELY REMEMBER IT AT ALL, THOUGH.

I wasn't exactly interested...

THE LULU TRIBE.

TIONA'S ATTENDANT, LIORA, WAS ONE OF THEIR PEOPLE.

IN OTHER WORDS, I JUST NEED TO FIND A WAY TO ***RESOLVE*** THE MATTER.

AS A RESULT OF THE INCIDENT, MY RELATIONSHIP WITH TIONA HAS SOURED.

IF SHE WINDS UP BELIEVING THAT I WAS AN INSTIGATOR OF THIS INCIDENT...

...I SUPPOSE IT'S NO SURPRISE SHE'D FORM A POOR OPINION OF ME, WHETHER IN MY ORIGINAL FUTURE OR THE ONE THIS DIARY NOW DESCRIBES.

YUP YUP

THOUGH THAT CAN'T BE MY **ONLY** PLAN, OF COURSE.

IF I CAN GET ON THEIR GOOD SIDE, THEIR HELP COULD DO WONDERS FOR THE IMPENDING SHORTAGE.

TIONA'S FAMILY, THE RUDOLVONS, RULE OVER A TERRITORY RICH IN THE CROPS I SO DESPERATELY NEED.

THE ABDUCTION OF OUTLAND COUNT RUDOLVON

THIS ENTRY IS INTRIGUING AS WELL.

AND ON THAT SUBJECT...

FLIP

THE EMPEROR DID NOT TAKE KINDLY TO THIS NEWS AND LASHED OUT IN A FIT OF ENVY.

THE PEOPLE, IN TURN, ROSE UP IN ANGER, SPARKING THE FLAMES OF REVOLUTION.

WHEN HIS PEOPLE BEGAN TO SUFFER DURING THE FAMINE, THE OUTCOUNT OFFERED UP HIS OWN STORES TO FEED THEM, EARNING THEIR ADORATION.

THIS IS *HIM* WE'RE DISCUSSING, AFTER ALL...

THIS SEEMS... STRANGE.

THIS INCIDENT, AND ITS CONSE-QUENCES, WERE UNCHANGED FROM THE ORIGINAL TIMELINE. HOWEVER...

IT WOULD BE VERY UNLIKE MY FATHER TO CAUSE SUCH AN ISSUE.

THE EMPEROR OF TEARMOON:

MATTHIAS LUNA TEARMOON

MIA!

I'M TRULY SORRY IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE THE LAST TIME I COULD SEE YOU.

HMPH!

SHWING

IT IS A PLEASURE TO SEE YOU WELL.

GOOD DAY TO YOU, YOUR MAJESTY.

FSH

MIA... HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU...

ちょこん

CURTSY

YOU WISHED TO SPEAK WITH ME, FATHER?

...THAT YOU SHOULD FEEL FREE TO CALL ME PAPA?!

トオBトオAトオAム

THE EMPEROR'S DOTING TENDENCIES STRETCHED FAR BEYOND THE POINT OF REASON.

HE MIGHT START A WAR IF I ASKED HIM TO, BUT OTHERWISE, HE'S AN ALTOGETHER HARMLESS MAN.

INDEED... FATHER'S ONLY INTEREST IS TRYING TO BUTTER ME UP.

IT'S ALMOST AS IF...

WOULD HE TRULY BECOME JEALOUS JUST BECAUSE SOME OTHER NOBLE GREW POPULAR WITH HIS PEOPLE?

...SOMEONE FABRICATED THIS INCIDENT...

...IN AN EFFORT TO LEAD THE EMPIRE DOWN THE PATH TO REVOLUTION.

I HAVE...

...A TERRIBLE FEELING ABOUT THIS.

SHUDDER

!?...

OR PERHAPS...

...THE HAND OF GOD IS WORKING IN THE REVOLUTION'S FAVOR AND PUSHING THE EMPIRE TOWARD ITS RUIN?

WHAT IS THIS...? THIS OMINOUS SENSATION THAT CHURNS WITHIN MY STOMACH?

...

I THINK...

I THINK...

INDEED.

MIA WAS CARTSICK.

CLUNK

ゴト

ゴト

CLATTER

...I'M GOING TO BE SICK...

I'M FINISHED READING!

YOU CAN COME BACK NOW, PLEASE!

ANNE... AAANNE...

I FEEL SICK...

TOTTER

TRYING TO READ INSIDE A CARRIAGE WAS A TERRIBLE MISTAKE...

A...

AAANNE...

CAN'T HEAR HER

IN THAT MOMENT, MIA, TEARY-EYED AND CURLED INTO A BALL...

...COULD HARDLY HAVE LIVED UP TO THE SAGELY IMAGE THE STUDENTS AT SAINT-NOEL HELD OF HER ANY LESS.

THUNK

CLATTER

Urp...

Chapter 21

FIVE DAYS AFTER MIA'S RETURN TO THE EMPIRE

FIRST AN AUDIENCE WITH MY FATHER...

...THEN GREETING ALL THE HIGH-RANKING NOBLES, AND MY WELCOME BACK PARTY...

もぐもぐ

I AM EXHAUSTED...

CLACK

PARDON ME.

MIA FINDS HERSELF LONGING FOR THE ACADEMY ALREADY.

SIGH

OH, HOW I MISS MY CAREFREE LIFE AT SCHOOL.

I AM OVERJOYED TO SEE THAT YOU HAVE RETURNED SAFELY.

WELCOME BACK, YOUR HIGHNESS.

STARE

?

CURT AS EVER, THIS MAN...

AND YET I ALMOST MISSED THAT STIFF EXPRESSION OF HIS.

SMILE

I, TOO, AM GLAD TO SEE YOU WELL.

THANK YOU, LUDWIG.

IS SOME-THING THE MATTER?

OH!

NO, NO, NOTHING OF THE SORT.

...THAT IS ALL.

I'VE WRITTEN ALL THE PERTINENT DETAILS REGARDING OUR FOOD RESERVES HERE.

IT'S STILL NOT ENOUGH...

SIGH

HMM...

...

YOUR HIGHNESS.

IT WOULD ONLY MAKE SENSE TO STOCKPILE THAT QUANTITY OF GRAIN IF WE WERE PREPARING FOR A FAMINE THE SCALE AND SEVERITY OF WHICH THE EMPIRE HAS NEVER SEEN.

HOWEVER...I MUST STRESS THAT FURTHER STOCKPILING OF GRAINS POSES A SIGNIFICANT RISK OF WASTAGE.

I AGREE THAT THE STATE OF THE RESERVES IS LESS THAN IDEAL.

IT WOULD KEEP TEARMOON FED EVEN IF OUR HARVESTS WERE COMPLETELY DECIMATED FOR YEARS.

YES... I APPRECIATE YOUR CONCERNS.

NEVER-THELESS...

SURELY SHE'S AWARE OF THOSE ISSUES...?

THE COLLAPSE OF OUR ECONOMY'S A MORE REALISTIC CONCERN THAN A FAMINE.

MOREOVER, STOCKPILING FOOD TAKES MONEY, AND IF NOTHING HAPPENS, THAT FUND-ING WILL HAVE GONE TO WASTE.

THE STORES WE HAVE ON HAND WILL NOT BE ENOUGH, LUDWIG.

...

A FEW YEARS FROM NOW, A FAMINE LIKE NONE OTHER WILL BE UPON US.

I KNOW. I'VE SEEN IT FOR MYSELF.

YOUR HIGH-NESS...

...LET ME FIRST SAY THAT I HAVE FAITH IN YOUR JUDGMENT.

LUDWIG...

IF YOU WISH FOR OUR STOCK-PILES TO BE BOLSTERED, I WILL SEE IT DONE, IN SPITE OF MY MISGIVINGS.

HOWEVER, WE WILL NEED TO FIND A WAY TO EXPLAIN THIS DECISION TO THE NOBILITY.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

WE HAVE ALREADY GIVEN THEM NOTICE THAT THEY ARE TO CURB SPENDING AND REDUCE WASTE.

WE RUN THE RISK OF LEADING THEM TO CONCLUDE THAT YOU, IN FACT, ARE THE ONE SPENDING WASTEFULLY.

I KNOW PERFECTLY WELL THAT OUR STORES ARE NOT SUFFICIENT.

HOW FRUS-TRATING IT IS THAT I CAN'T EXPLAIN MY REASONS...

UGGGH...

YOU HAVE A POINT, YES...

THEY CERTAINLY ARE EXPERTS AT FINDING FAULT IN OTHERS.

...WE'LL NEED TO CHANGE OUR ANGLE OF APPROACH.

CLENCH

AT THIS POINT...

YOU SAID THAT YOU HAVE FAITH IN ME, YES?

THEN PLEASE PROCEED UNDER THE ASSUMPTION THAT THERE WILL BE A SERIOUS FAMINE IN A FEW YEARS' TIME.

LUDWIG.

FSH

YOU MEAN TO SAY THAT I'M TO PREPARE NOT FOR A POSSIBLE FAMINE...

...BUT RATHER, FOR AN INEVITABLE ONE?

TWITCH

IS THAT CORRECT?

YES, IT IS.

AND OPERATING UNDER THAT ASSUMPTION, I HAVE A QUESTION.

IF WE FAIL TO AMASS THE SUPPLIES WE NEED BY THE TIME THE FAMINE STRIKES, WHAT SHOULD WE DO THEN?

SHE'S CERTAINLY SURE OF HERSELF...

THERE'S LITTLE TO BE DONE ABOUT THAT.

PRICES INCREASE WHEN DEMAND OUTSTRIPS SUPPLY. IT'S ONLY NATURAL.

Hmm...

TYPICALLY, WE'D HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO HAVE FOOD IMPORTED FROM AFAR.

HOWEVER, DOING SO WOULD RUIN THE EMPIRE'S FINANCES.

TYPICALLY, YES...

NOTHING IS MORE EXPENSIVE THAN FOOD DURING A FAMINE, AFTER ALL. ISN'T THAT RIGHT?

I WAS ONCE TOLD THAT YOU COULD BUY A CASTLE FOR THE PRICE OF A BAG OF WHEAT.

THAT'S HOW UNNATURAL THE HELL THAT'S SOON TO VISIT THE EMPIRE WILL BE.

NATURAL, PERHAPS, BUT ONLY TO A POINT.

INCREASING OUR STOCKPILES IS THE ONLY WAY TO KEEP THE MERCHANTS FROM TAKING ADVANTAGE OF US... BUT IT'S BEYOND OUR MEANS.

AND SINCE ALL THE CROPS IN THE REGION WILL BE WIPED OUT, THE CHANCE OF INCREASING SUPPLY IS EQUALLY SLIM.

GRRR

BRRR...

AND REALLY, IT'S ALL SO TERRIBLY UNFAIR!

IT'S NOT LIKE ALL THE FOOD IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD IS GOING TO VANISH!

"FAMINES ARE NOT CAUSED BY A LACK OF TOTAL FOOD AVAILABLE."

"RATHER, THEY OCCUR DUE TO IMPEDIMENTS IN THE TRANSPORT OF FOOD..."

ALTHOUGH MIA WAS SLIGHTLY PREOCCUPIED BY MATTERS OF ROMANCE AT THE ACADEMY, SHE DID FIND TIME TO GET SOME LEARNING DONE AS WELL.

SPECIFICALLY, SHE STUDIED UP ON FAMINES.

IT SEEMS I MISUNDER-STOOD HOW ALL OF THIS WORKED.

I SEE...

WHAT ARE YOU READING, PRINCESS MIA?

CHLOE!

...IT'S BEING UNABLE TO GET IT TO THOSE WHO NEED IT.

IT ISN'T A MATTER OF FOOD RUN-NING OUT...

COME TO THINK OF IT...

OH, NOT A STORYBOOK TODAY?

Well...

NOT EVEN I DEVOTE *ALL* MY TIME TO IDLE AMUSEMENTS.

FROM A MERCHANT'S PERSPECTIVE, WHAT WOULD YOU MAKE OF A FAMINE IN ANOTHER NATION?

A FAMINE?

YOU COME FROM A FAMILY OF MERCHANTS, DON'T YOU, CHLOE?

AS A RESULT, MERCHANTS COULD BRING FOOD INTO THE MOST FAMINE-STRICKEN REGIONS AND SELL IT AT A HIGH PRICE.

LET ME SEE. TO START, A FAMINE WOULD MEAN DRASTIC SHIFTS IN THE PRICE OF GOODS.

YES, I DO RECALL CHLOE SAYING THAT.

THAT'S JUST HOW MERCHANTS THINK. WHEN WE HAVE A CHANCE TO PROFIT, WE TAKE IT!

IF ONLY WE COULD PURCHASE CHEAP FOOD FROM MERCHANTS DURING THE FAMINE, ALL OF OUR PROBLEMS WOULD BE SOLVED...

...

!

I'VE GOT IT!

AH!

YOUR HIGH-NESS...?

I'VE COME UP WITH AN EXCELLENT IDEA, LUDWIG!

ARE YOU LISTENING? IN SHORT...

ごにょごにょ

ごにょごにょ

...

THAT...

MIA'S PLAN WAS, IN FACT, QUITE SIMPLISTIC AND RELATIVELY SELF-SERVING.

...IS NOTHING SHORT OF BRILLIANT.

AND YET, SOMEHOW, LUDWIG WAS PROFOUNDLY IMPRESSED BY IT.

A CAPABLE MERCHANT WHO BUILT HIS BUSINESS FROM THE GROUND UP.

HIS BUSINESS ACUMEN AND LEVELHEADED JUDGMENT HAVE MADE HIM INTO A PROMINENT AND RESPECTED FIGURE AMONG HIS FELLOW MERCHANTS.

CHLOE'S FATHER: MARCO FORKROAD.

I SENT CHLOE TO SAINT-NOEL ACADEMY FOR THE SAKE OF HER FUTURE, PLAIN AND SIMPLE.

I WANTED HER TO RECEIVE THE BEST POSSIBLE EDUCATION, AND I HOPED SHE MIGHT OVERCOME HER SHYNESS AND MAKE SOME FRIENDS AS WELL.

HOW COULD I HAVE KNOWN...

OF COURSE, I KNEW SHE MIGHT MAKE SOME CONNECTIONS IN THE PROCESS IF THOSE FRIENDS JUST HAPPENED TO BE NOBILITY.

SMILE

SMILE

TA DA DUUUN

...THAT MY PRECIOUS DAUGHTER WOULD BEFRIEND THE PRINCESS OF THE WHOLE EMPIRE?!

IT IS AN HONOR TO MEET YOU, YOUR HIGHNESS.

WHEN LIFE GAVE MARCO LEMONS, HE MADE LEMONADE. HE NEVER MISSED A CHANCE FOR PROFIT.

IN OTHER WORDS, HE WAS A MERCHANT TO HIS CORE.

STILL, THIS IS A STROKE OF GOOD FORTUNE.

THIS CONNEC-TION COULD PROVE GOOD FOR BUSINESS, AFTER ALL.

WELCOME, SIR MARCO FORKROAD.

I HOPE CHLOE IS WELL?

I AM CHLOE'S FATHER, MARCO FORKROAD.

I NOT ONLY OWN A MERCHANT COMPANY, BUT HAVE ALSO BEEN GRANTED THE TITLE OF KNIGHT.

IT'S ONLY RIGHT FOR ME TO OFFER HER MY GREETINGS.

ABOVE ALL ELSE, THOUGH, SHE'S MY DAUGHTER'S FIRST FRIEND.

VERY WELL, YES. THANK YOU FOR ASKING...

...I HAVE A QUESTION, IF YOU'D BE SO KIND.

BY THE WAY, SIR MARCO...

WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE FOR YOU TO FERRY SOME GOODS FROM ACROSS THE SEA?

OF COURSE! WHAT IS IT?

SMILE

MY COMPANY OWNS A GREAT NUMBER OF MERCHANT SHIPS, AND THEY ARE AT YOUR DISPOSAL, SHOULD YOU REQUIRE THEM.

HUH?

WHAT KIND OF GOODS DOES YOUR HIGHNESS HAVE IN MIND?

SPICES, PERHAPS? OR SOME EXOTIC RUGS?

OH!

WHY, YES, IT WOULD.

THE ONES FROM OVER-SEAS ARE OF EXCELLENT QUALITY AND ARE ALL THE RAGE AMONG THE EMPIRE'S NOBILITY...

SMILE

COULD THIS BE MY CHANCE TO STRIKE A DEAL?

I WANT WHEAT.

...PARDON?

WHAT IS SHE THINKING?

WE GROW WHEAT IN THE EMPIRE! OUR NEIGHBORS DO TOO!

HAULING IT ACROSS AN OCEAN, AT GREAT TIME AND EXPENSE, WOULD BE NEEDLESS AND MERITLESS!

YOU WANT ME... TO IMPORT WHEAT FROM OVERSEAS?

YES, EXACTLY.

ALSO...

...I HAVE ONE CONDITION.

IF A FAMINE STRUCK AND FOOD WAS LACKING, I MIGHT TURN A PROFIT BY IMPORTING IT...

...BUT WHO WOULD PAY A PREMIUM FOR WHEAT OTHERWISE? I WOULDN'T EVEN RECOUP THE COST OF SHIPPING.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF TRADE IS TO BUY GOODS FROM PLACES THAT HAVE THEM AND SELL THEM IN PLACES THAT DON'T.

No!

BY THAT, YOU MEAN...?

THE PRICE YOU OFFER MUST BE DECIDED BEFORE-HAND WITH A GUARANTEE THAT YOU WILL HONOR IT, NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS.

WHA—?!

JOLT

THAT EVEN IF A FAMINE OCCURS...

...YOU WOULD NOT BE PERMITTED TO INCREASE YOUR PRICE.

CLENCH...

!!

IT'S OUT-RAGEOUSLY ONE-SIDED!

WE STAND NOTHING TO GAIN FROM THAT DEAL!

MEANWHILE, THE EMPIRE GAINS A STABLE SOURCE OF FOOD IN THE CASE OF DISASTER...

AH!

WAIT...

SO THEN...

...I'M BEING TESTED?

IS THAT WHAT THIS IS?

Princess Mia's so kind and so funny and so wonderful...

FROM WHAT CHLOE HAS TOLD ME, THE PRINCESS IS NOT THE SORT OF PERSON WHO'D EVER USE HER AUTHORITY TO FORCE PEOPLE TO DO THINGS HER WAY.

I SEE NOW...

SHE DRAGGED ME IN BEFORE I EVEN REALIZED IT...

IS SHE GOING TO DECIDE IF I'M WORTH DOING BUSINESS WITH BY WHETHER OR NOT I CAN CATCH ON?!

OHO HO HO

THERE MUST BE SOMETHING MORE TO THIS.

THIS IS THE NEGOTIATING TABLE, AND WE'VE ALREADY BEGUN A WAR OF WORDS!

MARCO FINDS HIMSELF GETTING MORE THAN A LITTLE WORKED UP!

BAM!

AH! THAT'S RIGHT!

I ALMOST FORGOT...

!

HMMMMMM

THINK!

WHAT MERIT DOES THIS DEAL OFFER? WHAT COULD I POSSIBLY GAIN BY SIGNING ON?

I WILL ALWAYS PURCHASE AT LEAST A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF WHEAT, WHICH WILL BE AGREED UPON IN ADVANCE.

...!

...THAT WOULD MAKE THIS...

...A PRODUCT UNAFFECTED BY MARKET FLUCTUATIONS!

A SET PRICE FOR A SET QUANTITY OF WHEAT...

WHETHER OR NOT A FAMINE OCCURS...

THESE ARE THE DETAILS OF THE CONTRACT.

STEP

IF I AM TO BRING THE WHEAT IN FROM OVERSEAS, I WILL HAVE TO SET MY PRICE HIGHER THAN IS USUAL.

HAS YOUR HIGHNESS CONSIDERED THAT POSSIBILITY?

THESE TERMS...!

GASP

OHO HO HO...

BEAM

BEAM

NOW WE'LL BE ABLE TO BUY CHEAP WHEAT WHENEVER WE WANT IT!

MY MATE'S RATES PLAN HAS BEEN A TOTAL SUCCESS!

MIA, WHO SAW A BAG OF WHEAT SOLD FOR THE PRICE OF A CASTLE DURING THE FAMINE, HAD A HORRIBLY SKEWED PERSPECTIVE OF THE MEANING OF "CHEAP."

EVEN FACTORING IN LONG-DISTANCE TRANSPORTATION COSTS, THIS IS STILL A HIGH PRICE!

AT THESE RATES, AS LONG AS MY EXPENSES DON'T GO THROUGH THE ROOF, I'LL MAKE A STEADY PROFIT NO MATTER WHAT!

TO A NORMAL PAIR OF EYES, THE PRICE SHE'D NAMED CAME ACROSS IN AN ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT LIGHT.

BUT NO!

THAT'S NOT EVEN THE HALF OF IT!

AH!

WHAT SHE'S OFFERING ME IS A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL ARRANGEMENT, OF A SORT.

SHE'LL PAY ME A PREMIUM WHEN ALL IS WELL, AND SHOULD FAMINE STRIKE, I'LL LEND HER A HAND IN TURN...

WHAT SORT OF VESSEL WOULD WE NEED TO TRANSPORT IT?

WHAT TROUBLES WOULD WE HAVE TO WATCH OUT FOR?

ESTABLISHING A FLOW OF GOODS FROM THE GROUND UP INCURS ALL SORTS OF COSTS.

WE MAY EVEN NEED TO HIRE WORKERS FAMILIAR WITH THE PROCESS.

IF WE WERE TO IMPORT IT FROM OVERSEAS, WE'D HAVE TO START BY MAKING CONTACT WITH FOREIGN WHEAT FARMERS.

FORKROAD & CO. DOESN'T ORDINARILY DEAL IN WHEAT.

THEN, IF A FAMINE WERE TO OCCUR, WE'D HAVE EVERYTHING WE'D NEED TO IMPORT FOOD FASTER, MORE EFFICIENTLY, AND MORE COST-EFFECTIVELY THAN ANYONE ELSE!

EVEN IF WE HAVE TO DELIVER ON OUR PROMISE TO THE EMPIRE, WE'LL BE ABLE TO USE THAT SUPPLY CHAIN TO SELL MORE WHEAT TO OTHER CUSTOMERS, LONG BEFORE OUR COMPETITORS!

THAT SAID...

...WHAT IF ALL THE GROUND-WORK WAS ALREADY LAID?

IN OTHER WORDS, THIS GIRL...

SMILE

Is he still deciding?

GLANCE

...IS TRYING TO PROTECT HER PEOPLE FROM FAMINE...
...WHILE AT THE SAME TIME PROTECTING THE INTERESTS OF HER PARTNER IN BUSINESS! SHE'S A VERITABLE GODDESS!
MARCO, TOO, FALLS VICTIM TO MIA'S AURA OF OBFUSCATION.
GULP
CHLOE...
WHO IN THE WORLD IS THIS PRINCESS YOU'VE BEFRIENDED?
YOUR HIGHNESS.

WE WOULD BE HONORED TO ENTER INTO THIS CONTRACT WITH YOU.

FORKROAD & CO. ACCEPTS YOUR CONDITIONS.

!

GRIN

I LOOK FORWARD TO DOING BUSINESS WITH YOU.

MY THANKS!

...

HER HIGHNESS'S GENIUS TRULY KNOWS NO BOUNDS.

THE METHOD SHE PROPOSED TODAY WAS NO EXCEPTION.

IN SHORT, WE'LL ASK FOR MATE'S RATES!

DO YOU SEE WHAT I MEAN?

GRANTING A FRIEND SPECIAL PRIVILEGES, THOUGH? THAT, THEY COULD UNDERSTAND.

NEPOTISM ABOUNDS AMONG THEIR ILK, AFTER ALL.

THEY COULDN'T CARE LESS ABOUT THE DEATH AND SUFFERING OF THE MASSES.

TELLING THE NOBILITY TO REDUCE WASTEFUL SPENDING SO THE PEOPLE WON'T GO HUNGRY WOULD PROMPT NO END OF OPPOSITION.

IF ANYTHING, THEIR KIND PERCEIVES THAT LEVEL OF HYPOCRISY AS NORMAL AND ACCEPTABLE WHEN IT COMES FROM THE IMPERIAL FAMILY.

HOWEVER, THAT SELFISHNESS WILL LIKELY BE WRITTEN OFF AS THE EXPECTED ARROGANCE OF THE EMPEROR'S KIN.

OF COURSE, SEEING HER HIGHNESS ENGAGE IN THE VERY SORT OF DOUBLE-DEALING SHE'S FAULTED THEM FOR WILL NOT DO THEIR OPINION OF HER ANY FAVORS.

SHE DOES NOT.

YES!

BY STAINING HER OWN IMAGE, SHE SEEKS TO GIVE THE GENTRY A MOTIVE THEY'LL BE ABLE TO LIVE WITH!

I TAKE PRIDE IN THE WORK I'VE DONE WHILE HER HIGHNESS WAS AWAY AT SCHOOL.

NEVERTHELESS, I MUST ADMIT, I'VE FELT I MAY HAVE TUGGED THE REINS A TOUCH TOO HARD AT TIMES.

BUT WAIT...

THIS IS HER HIGHNESS WE'RE TALKING ABOUT, SO WHAT IF...?

PERHAPS SHE HAS REALIZED THAT AS WELL? PERHAPS, BY ENGAGING IN UNSCRUPULOUS DEALINGS HERSELF...

...SHE SEEKS TO DEMONSTRATE WHAT DEGREE OF CRONYISM AND PARTIALITY WILL BE TOLERATED IN THE FUTURE?

POLITICS IS NOT A GAME THAT CAN BE PLAYED THROUGH VIRTUOUS MEANS ALONE.

ONE MUST APPLY THE STICK AND THE CARROT, PUNISHING AND PERMITTING ILL BEHAVIOR AS IS NECESSARY...

MUTTER

STAGGERING. TRULY STAGGERING...

JUST HOW DEEP AND VAST ARE THE RESERVES OF STRATEGY THAT LURK WITHIN HER MIND?!

IT HARDLY EVEN BEARS SAYING...

! WHAAAM

OHO HO HO!

十 GRIN 7

...BUT MIA'S MIND CONTAINED ABSOLUTELY NOTHING OF THE SORT WHATSOEVER.

THAT'S ONE STEP FURTHER AWAY FROM THE GUILLOTINE!

木 GRIN 乃

Chapter 22

A WEEK HAD PASSED SINCE MIA MADE HER DEAL WITH CHLOE'S FATHER.

HER HIGHNESS'S SAFETY RESTS IN YOUR HANDS. GUARD HER WITH YOUR LIFE.

YES, SIR!

TODAY, MIA CHOSE TO GO INTO THE NEWMOON DISTRICT AND INSPECT THE STATUS OF THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL'S SLUMS.

I FIGURE SHE WANTS TO GET A LOOK AT THE HOSPITAL SHE PUT UP THERE.

SEEMS SHE DIDN'T JUST BUILD IT AS A STUNT AFTER ALL. SHE'S ACTUALLY SEEING IT THROUGH.

GUESS THE GREAT SAGE OF THE EMPIRE DOESN'T SKIMP ON THE DETAILS.

MUTTER

WHAT'S THE PRINCESS THINK SHE'LL GET OUT OF THIS?

WHY DRAG HERSELF INTO THE SLUMS? SHE DOES KNOW HOW UNSAFE THAT DISTRICT IS, RIGHT?

HUH...?

QUIT YOUR GRUMBLING, ROOKIES!

!

JUMP

SIGH...

IT'D BE A LOT EASIER TO KEEP HER SAFE IF SHE'D JUST SIT TIGHT IN THE CASTLE, THOUGH...

TELL ME ABOUT IT.

I WAS WITH HER THE LAST TIME SHE WENT INTO THE SLUMS.

I CAN SAY FOR A FACT THAT SHE'S NOT LIKE THE NOBLES YOU TWO ARE THINKING OF.

THERE'LL BE NO BAD-MOUTHING HER ON MY WATCH! GOT IT?

HER HIGH-NESS IS... DIFFERENT.

NOT TO MENTION THE WISDOM TO TAKE DECISIVE ACTION AND BUILD THE HOSPITAL THOSE SLUMS SO DESPERATELY NEEDED!

SHE'S INCREDIBLE, I'M TELLING YOU!

AND SHE HAS THE COMPAS-SION TO HELP THE STREET CHILDREN, NEVER FLINCHING FROM THEIR FILTHY VISAGES!

Me

SHE HAS THE COURAGE TO GO WHENEVER SHE'S NEEDED, NO MATTER HOW MUCH DANGER IT MIGHT PUT HER IN!

A PORTRAIT OF A MAN WHOSE OPIN-ION OF MIA HAS SUFFERED HYPERIN-FLATION DRASTIC ENOUGH TO RIVAL LUDWIG'S.

GOOD DAY TO YOU.

AH!

HELLO, EVERYONE!

!

GASP

SHE'S NOT WEARING A DRESS?!

THE KNIGHTS OF THE IMPERIAL GUARD...

WHISPER

DOESN'T HER HIGHNESS LOOK LOVELY TODAY?

YEAH...

ALMOST ALL OF THEM STAYED BY MY SIDE DURING THE REVOLUTION. THEY FOUGHT FOR ME TO THE BITTER END...

I'LL SPARE MORE SMILES THAN THEY COULD EVER ASK FOR!

I DEEPLY APPRECIATE YOUR ESCORTING ME TODAY.

にっこり BEAM

A ROYAL SMILE IS THE WEIGHTIEST OF BRIBES.

OF COURSE!

O-

I SEE SHE'S WON THE HEARTS OF THE IMPERIAL GUARD.

HER HIGHNESS NEVER FAILS TO IMPRESS...

NOW THEN, SHALL WE BE OFF?

YES, YOUR HIGH-NESS!

GLANCE

キョロ

MY...

IS IT JUST ME, OR HAS THIS PLACE CHANGED OF LATE?

キョロ

GLANCE

IT HAS INDEED, YOUR HIGHNESS.

THANKS IN LARGE PART TO THE HOSPITAL BEING IN OPERATION.

TMP TMP

IS IT, NOW?

I'M PLEASED TO HEAR THAT.

WE'VE ALSO DOUBLED THE RATIONS BEING DISTRIBUTED IN THIS AREA.

REPORTS SAY THERE ARE FEWER DEATHS IN THE STREETS NOW. LIFE, IT SEEMS, IS SLOWLY BUT SURELY RETURNING TO THE DISTRICT.

AH!

YOUR HIGHNESS!

!

STOP RIGHT THERE!

LEAP

DASH

FSH

MY!

I REMEMBER YOU.

AREN'T YOU THE BOY FROM LAST TIME?

YEAH!

BECAUSE OF YOU, YOUR HIGH-NESS!

GRIN

THANKS SO MUCH!

NOD

ARE YOU GETTING ENOUGH TO EAT THESE DAYS?

MM-HMM!

WHAT MIGHT THIS BE?

HERE!

IT'S A THANK-YOU GIFT!

RUSTLE

IT'S A UNICORN HAIRPIN!

A UNI-CORN?!

MY!

IT'S MADE FROM A TREE THAT GROWS IN MY HOME-LAND! THEY CALL THEM UNICORN HAIRPINS WHERE I'M FROM.

Oh! I SEE NOW.

Corn☆

STUDY

STUDY

HMM, YES... IT DOES HAVE A LUSTER LIKE NOTHING I'VE EVER SEEN...

IT MUST TRULY BE THE HORN OF ONE OF THOSE MYTHICAL STEEDS...

HEE HEE

WELL THEN, LET ME SEE...

THANK YOU!

THIS IS A WONDERFUL PRESENT.

BLUSH

DASH

OH?

MY...

THAT PIN IS A KEEPSAKE OF HIS MOTHER.

HM?

AH!

FATHER!

IT HAS, YES.

SMILE

FAR TOO LONG INDEED, YOUR HIGHNESS.

HOW LONG IT'S BEEN SINCE WE LAST MET.

I'M SORRY TO OFFER YOU SUCH MEAGER HOSPITAL-ITY.

YOUR SUPPORT HAS BEEN MOST GENEROUS, BUT I'VE FOUND MYSELF TOO BUSY TO FIX UP THE PLACE.

THIS WAY, PLEASE.

HE'S LEAVING HIS OWN ROOM FOR LAST, THEN. THAT'S SO VERY LIKE HIM.

SMILE

SO HE SAYS, THOUGH IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THE REPAIRS OF THE CHURCH'S AND ORPHANAGE'S WALLS ARE PROCEEDING SMOOTHLY.

I UNDERSTAND YOU'VE BECOME FRIENDS WITH THE LADY SAINT, YOUR HIGH-NESS...

?

THE LADY SAINT...?

Ah!

THAT'S RIGHT!

HE'S NOTHING LIKE THOSE PEOPLE WHO COME TO US FOR AID, BUT IN TRUTH ONLY SEEK TO LINE THEIR OWN POCKETS. HOW VERY ADMIRABLE!

HMM

HMM

MUCH AS I'D RATHER HAVE STAYED AWAY FROM HER ENTIRELY...

OH, YOU MEAN MISS RAFINA!

WE HAVE INDEED BECOME FRIENDS, YES.

AND IT'S NOT LIKE I COULD JUST IGNORE THOSE WITHOUT REPLYING...

That's what friends do!

I CAN'T FATH- OM WHY, BUT IT SEEMS SHE'S TAKEN A LIKING TO ME. SHE'S EVEN BEEN WRITING ME LETTERS OVER OUR SUMMER HOLIDAY!

BOOM

SO THE RUMORS REALLY WERE TRUE!

UGH, I CAN'T STAND THIS!

AFTER ALL, THAT WOMAN IS TERRIFY- ING!

IMAGINE IF I WROTE SOMETHING THAT MADE HER HATE ME!

OH, MY GOOD- NESS...

BOOM

EEEAM

?

SQUEE

SQUEE

BUT IS IT JUST ME...OR IS HE REACTING IN MUCH THE SAME WAY AN IDOL'S FAN WOULD?

UM, IF IT'S NOT TOO MUCH TROUBLE, YOUR HIGHNESS...

RUMMAGE

I SUPPOSE THAT FOR A MAN OF THE CENTRAL ORTHODOX CHURCH, MISS RAFINA MUST BE SOMETHING OF A LOFTY ICON.

I SUPPOSE I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY HE'D BE EXCITED.

HE REALLY IS A FAN!

BLUSH

COULD YOU... GET ME HER AUTOGRAPH?

BLAH
BLAH
BLAH
BLAH
BLAH
BLAH
BLAH
BLAH
BLAH
PAINTERS ARE CALLED IN FROM ALL OVER THE PRINCIPALITY, AND MOST REMARKABLY OF ALL, EACH PAINTING HAS A NUMBER ON ITS BACK THAT INDICATES...
BY THE WAY, THAT PORTRAIT CAME DIRECTLY FROM THE HOLY PRINCIPALITY OF BELLUGA! THEY'VE BEEN PAINTED ONCE A YEAR EVER SINCE THE LADY SAINT WAS BORN!
Heh...
I'D BE MOST PLEASED IF SHE'D INCLUDE MY NAME, AS WELL...
RIGHT...
CRINGE
MIA KNEW WHAT SORT OF PERSON WOULD COMMISSION COUNTLESS PORTRAITS OF HIS DAUGHTER AND SPREAD THEM ACROSS A NATION.
AFTER ALL, SHE WOULDN'T PUT IT PAST HER OWN FATHER TO DO JUST THAT.
Papa's here!
Mia!
I SEE MISS RAFINA HAS HER OWN SHARE OF TROUBLES...
OH!
YES, OF COURSE.
B—
BLAH
BY THE WAY!
YOU MENTIONED THIS HAIR-PIN BEING A KEEPSAKE?
AND OF COURSE, HER MOST ADMIRABLE QUALITY WOULD HAVE TO BE—

SHI

TVERI

THAT BOY'S MOTHER HAILED FROM A SMALL TRIBE THAT LIVES IN A FORESTED REGION NEAR THE EMPIRE'S BORDER...

A REGIONAL CONFLICT BROKE OUT ON THE BORDER...

...BETWEEN THE EMPIRE AND A MINORITY TRIBE OF FOREST-DWELLERS KNOWN AS THE LULUS.

IT COULDN'T BE...

SURELY NOT.

S—

TIMID

TIMID

...HAPPENS TO BE KNOWN AS THE LULUS?

C—

COULD IT BE THAT THE TRIBE IN QUES-TION...

Ah!

UM, FATHER?

I KNEW IIIIIIT!

MIA REALIZES THAT SHE'S ALREADY STANDING KNEE-DEEP IN HER OWN GRAVE!

DOOOOOOOOOM

MY GOOD-NESS! I SEE THAT YOUR HIGHNESS WAS ALREADY AWARE!

MEANWHILE, THE PRIEST LEAPS TO A CONCLUSION THAT RAISES HIS OPINION OF MIA!

YOUR HIGHNESS IS FRIENDS WITH THE LADY SAINT, AFTER ALL.

BUT OF COURSE, IT'S ONLY NATURAL TO THINK YOU WOULD HAVE ALREADY INQUIRED.

W-WELL, ISN'T THIS HEAVY!

HOWEVER, SHE SOON GREW ILL, AND PASSED AWAY WHEN HER CHILD WAS STILL YOUNG.

AS I UNDER-STAND IT, SHE MET A MAN FROM ANOTHER TRIBE AND WENT ON TO BEAR HIS CHILD.

THIS LED TO A FIGHT BETWEEN HER AND HER PARENTS, AND IN THE END, SHE TOOK HER SON AND LEFT FOR THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL.

SHE WAS INDEED BORN INTO THE LULU TRIBE.

WHO EVEN KNOWS WHAT TROUBLE THIS PIN COULD LAND ME IN?!

MY BEST BET'S TO GIVE IT BACK AS SOON AS POSSIBLE!

MY!

THEN THIS PIN MUST MEAN SO MUCH TO HIM! I COULDN'T POSSIBLY ACCEPT IT!

I KNOW THE BOY WISHES VERY MUCH FOR YOU TO HAVE IT.

PLEASE KEEP IT, YOUR HIGHNESS.

I ASSUMED AS MUCH WHEN I LEARNED IT WAS A KEEPSAKE OF HIS MOTHER!

YOU DON'T HAVE TO SPELL IT OUT FOR ME!

SO PLEASE, YOUR HIGHNESS.

SMILE

HE'S FELT THAT WAY EVER SINCE YOU BROUGHT HIM HERE.

HE'S TOLD ME AGAIN AND AGAIN THAT HE WANTS NOTHING MORE THAN TO REPAY YOU FOR YOUR KINDNESS.

THAT HAIRPIN IS A TOKEN OF HIS HEARTFELT APPRECIATION.

OH, AND ALSO...

IF I MAY BE SO BOLD...AND ONLY SOMETIMES, WHEN YOU COME TO VISIT HERE...

MIGHT I ASK THAT YOU WEAR IT...?

O-OF COURSE!

I'LL TAKE PERFECT CARE OF IT!

IT MAY BE A SIMPLE ITEM OF LITTLE WORTH FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE, BUT I ASK THAT YOU HOLD ON TO IT REGARDLESS...

I SHALL WEAR IT EVERY DAY!!!

MIA FINDS HERSELF WITH A TOTAL LACK OF AN ESCAPE ROUTE!

BREATHE

M-MAY I ASK A FAVOR, FATHER?

YES, OF COURSE. WHAT IS IT?

IF I CAN'T GIVE IT BACK, THEN I HAVE NO OTHER CHOICE.

Ugggh...

BE-

I'LL TREASURE IT FOR ALL I'M WORTH AND DO EVERYTHING I CAN TO STAY ON THAT BOY'S GOOD SIDE!

WOULD YOU LET HIM KNOW THAT HIS PRESENT IS WONDERFUL, AND THAT I WILL TREASURE IT?

BAM

I'M SURE HE'LL BE DELIGHTED TO HEAR THAT YOU LIKED HIS GIFT.

SMILE

OH, WILL YOU?

...HER ACTIONS THAT DAY WOULD HAVE ENTIRELY UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES DOWN THE LINE.

LITTLE DID MIA KNOW...

Tearmoon Empire

Chapter 23

KNOWN AS PRINCESS MIA'S CURSED CASKET, IT WAS SAID TO HAVE BROUGHT RUIN TO EACH AND EVERY ONE OF ITS MANY OWNERS.

IN THE PREVIOUS TIMELINE...

...THERE EXISTED A CERTAIN JEWEL BOX.

ITS ORIGINAL OWNER WAS NO MYSTERY— IT WAS NONE OTHER THAN MIA LUNA TEARMOON, THE NOTORIOUS PRINCESS OF THE GUILLOTINE.

AS FOR THE CURRENT TIMELINE...

AS EXPECTED, THE COUNT OF RUDOLVON DID NOT AGREE TO OUR REQUEST.

I BRING NEWS, LORD BERMAN.

SW

HE IS AN *OUTCOUNT*, AND WORTHY OF NOTHING MORE!

AP

THAT MAN IS NO *COUNT*, YOU FOOL!

TURN

THE WHOLE AFFAIR BEGAN A SHORT TIME BEFORE-HAND...

VISCOUNT BERMAN.

A NOBLEMAN WHOSE TERRITORY NEIGHBORED THAT OF TIONA'S FAMILY, WHICH WAS KNOWN AS THE OUTLAND COUNTY OF RUDOLVON.

HIS ACTIONS WOULD LEAD TO THE EMPIRE'S DOWNFALL...AND HE WAS THE MAN WHO WAS TO CREATE PRINCESS MIA'S CURSED CASKET.

WHY IS IT THAT YOU RULE OVER A DOMAIN ***SMALLER*** THAN THAT OF AN UPSTART BUMPKIN SUCH AS THE OUTCOUNT OF RUDOLVON?

I MUST SAY, LORD BERMAN...

YOU ARE A CULTURED MAN, HAILING FROM A LONG LINE OF CENTRAL NOBILITY...AND SO, I FIND MYSELF PERPLEXED.

...IF IT WERE ME, I'D FIND THE THOUGHT THAT I WAS INFERIOR IN ANY WAY TO AN UNCULTURED NOBLE SUCH AS HIM SIMPLY UNBEARABLE.

OH, BUT PERHAPS I OVERSTEP!

IF THE THOUGHT DOES NOT VEX YOU, YOUR LORDSHIP, THEN ALL IS WELL.

HMPH...

WHILE THE OUT-COUNT'S LANDS ARE VAST, THEY'RE MOSTLY FARMLAND AND FOREST.

HARDLY ANYTHING TO BOAST ABOUT.

TRUE INDEED! AND YET...

WHY NOT CLEAR LAND FOR YOURSELF IN THE SEALENCE FOREST?

WHISPER

MIGHT I OFFER SOME ADVICE, YOUR LORDSHIP?

TWITCH

HOW COULD I BE LESSER THAN A COUNTRY BUMPKIN IN ANY WAY?

THE DOMAINS OF BERMAN AND RUDOLVON WERE SEPARATED BY ONE OF THE EMPIRE'S LARGEST EXPANSES OF WOODLAND.

THE SEALENCE FOREST...?

AS A RESULT, NO STRICT BORDER BETWEEN THE TWO TERRITORIES HAD EVER BEEN DECIDED UPON. THE FOREST ITSELF WAS THE CLOSEST THEY HAD TO A CLEAR DELINEATION.

IF I START CLEARING OUT THE FOREST ON MY SIDE...

I SEE NOW.

SYAM

BEFORE LONG, THOUGH, A PROBLEM AROSE.

...THEN THE NEWLY CLEARED LAND WILL BELONG TO ME! SO LONG AS I LEAVE A SINGLE ROW OF TREES STANDING, I CAN CLAIM THE REST AS MY DOMAIN!

L—

LORD BERMAN!

THIS SORT OF SELFISHNESS WAS THE NORM AMONG THE GENTRY.

CONTACT THE EBONY MOON MINISTRY!

TELL THEM TO DISPATCH TROOPS AT ONCE!

IT'S THE TRIBE THAT INHABITS THE SEALENCE FOREST— THE LULUS!

THEY'VE COME OUT IN OPPO-SITION TO THE PROJECT!

THEY SAY THEY'LL LAY DOWN THEIR LIVES TO PRO-TECT THE FOREST!

WHAT...?

IMPER-TINENT KNAVES...!

GRR

...THEIR COMMANDER REFUSED TO TAKE ACTION.

WE'RE HERE TO KEEP THE PEACE. NOTHING MORE.

THANKS TO LORD BERMAN'S COMMITMENT TO BRIBERY, THE HUNDRED-MAN FORCE HE WANTED WAS QUICKLY DISPATCHED. HOWEVER.....

YOU'RE ALL *USE-LESS!*

SLAM

USELESS, EVERY ONE OF YOU...

CLENCH

IT'S TIME FOR DRASTIC MEASURES...

I-INDEED, LORD BERMAN...

YOUR ANGER IS JUST.

NO ONE EVER LISTENS TO ME!

WE'LL PREPARE A GIFT FOR HER HIGHNESS THE PRINCESS, MIA LUNA TEARMOON.

PARDON?

A JEWEL BOX!

YOU KNOW OF THE UNICORN'S HORN, YES? A TREE THAT ONLY GROWS WITHIN THE SEALANCE FOREST?

WE'LL CRAFT AN EXTRAVAGANT JEWEL BOX FOR THE PRINCESS, AND SUBTLY INCORPORATE WOOD FROM ONE OF THOSE TREES INTO ITS DESIGN.

I COULD HAVE ANY NUMBER OF THESE BOXES MADE IF YOU SO WISH, YOUR HIGHNESS.

HOWEVER, I REQUIRE THE WOOD OF A CERTAIN FOREST TO DO SO...

MY!

WE'LL EARN THE PRINCESS'S BACKING FOR SURE!

EVERYONE KNOWS HOW HIS MAJESTY DOTES UPON HIS DAUGHTER.

CHARMING HER WILL MAKE HAVING THE IMPERIAL ARMY DISPATCHED TO EXTERMINATE THE LULUS A SIMPLE TASK!

Oh how I long for a jewel box, father!

Okay, let's get clear-cutting!

WHILE I'M AT IT, I CAN HAVE A FEW LULU CHILDREN KIDNAPPED, SELL THEM OFF TO SLAVERS, AND PIN IT ON THE IMPERIAL SOLDIERS.

THE LULUS WILL BE ENRAGED, AND IF THEY ATTACK ON THEIR OWN INITIATIVE, THE ARMY WILL HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO FIGHT BACK!

IF THAT WORKS OUT, WE WON'T EVEN NEED TO WAIT FOR THE BOX TO BE COMPLETED...

HMM HMM...

THE UNICORN'S HORN... WHERE HAVE I HEARD THAT BEFORE...?

WHAT WAS THAT?!

IT SEEMS HER HIGHNESS HAS TAKEN A LIKING TO A HAIRPIN MADE FROM UNICORN'S HORN LATELY.

APPARENTLY, SHE WEARS IT EVERY DAY.

OH, OF COURSE!

I OVERHEARD THE MAIDS DISCUSSING SOMETHING THE OTHER DAY.

PAP

A MERE HAIRPIN?!

IF THAT'S ALL IT TAKES TO SATISFY HER, I CAN HAVE ONE MADE RIGHT AWAY!

IN THAT CASE, THERE'S NO NEED FOR US TO MAKE ANY BOXES IN THE FIRST PLACE!

AND YET...

AND SO PRINCESS MIA'S CURSED CASKET WAS WRITTEN OUT OF THE HISTORY BOOKS.

YOUR HIGHNESS?

I DON'T BELIEVE I'VE HEARD OF HIM.

MY, WHO MIGHT THAT BE?

VISCOUNT BERMAN HAS REQUESTED AN AUDIENCE.

...DESTINY WOULD NEVERTHELESS COME CALLING FOR MIA IN THE FORM OF AN UNEXPECTED GUEST.

TMP

SMILE

GREETINGS, VISCOUNT BERMAN.

I DO BELIEVE THIS IS THE FIRST TIME WE'VE MET.

I APOLOGIZE FOR MY INTRUSION, YOUR HIGHNESS.

パァァ

SHI

AS A SIDE NOTE...

...AS OF LATE, MIA HAD LOOKED POSITIVELY RADIANT.

SUCH BEAUTY...

IIIII NE

!

TWITCH

MY WORD!

SPARKLE

SPARKLE

SPARKLE

...WAS HER HAIR.

SHE WAS, IN FACT, MORE GORGEOUS THAN SHE HAD EVER BEEN BEFORE.

AND THE BIGGEST REASON WHY...

A GIFT FROM PRINCE ABEL? TRULY?!

MY!

HE SENT YOU A LETTER AS WELL!

HE DID?! LET ME READ IT!

MY...

YES! HE SENT YOU A BOTTLE OF SHAMPOO.

"I KNOW YOU PROBABLY RECEIVE MORE GIFTS THAN YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH, BUT STILL, I HOPE THIS WILL PLEASE YOU..."

"THIS SHAMPOO DOESN'T JUST CLEAN HAIR! IT ALSO SUPPLIES IT WITH NUTRIENTS AND IMPROVES ITS LUSTER."

OH, PRINCE ABEL...

SWOON

MIA WAS EXTRAORDINARILY PLEASED BY ABEL'S PRESENT.

YES!

ABSOLUTELY!

OF COURSE WE SHOULD!

SHOULD WE TRY IT OUT RIGHT AWAY, MILADY?

ANNE WATCHED OVER MIA WITH A FOND SMILE.

WHAT A PERFECT GIFT!

PRINCE ABEL REALLY KNOWS WHAT HE'S DOING!

MILADY'S ALWAYS LOVED HER DAILY BATHS.

SPARKLE SPARKLE

SHINE SHINE

OF COURSE! THE BEAUTIFUL LUSTER OF HER HAIR...

IT'S ALMOST LIKE...

SHE HAD NO IDEA...

...LIKE THE MANE OF A GALLANT STEED, GALLOPING ACROSS THE BATTLEFIELD...

FWISH

...IT WAS HORSE SHAMPOO.

MIA WAS DELIGHTED TO USE IT... ON HERSELF.

PRINCESS MIA'S IN THE HORSEMANSHIP CLUB, SO I'M SURE SHE'LL APPRECIATE SOME TOP-QUALITY SHAMPOO FOR GROOMING HER FAVORITE HORSES!

I JUST HOPE SHE USES IT...

I SEE NOW...

THIS MUST BE WHY THEY GLORIFY HER AS THE "GREAT SAGE OF THE EMPIRE."

THE HAIR OF A HORSE IS MORE DEL-ICATE THAN THAT OF A HUMAN.

MANE-MAGNIFICENT

AS A RESULT, USING SHAMPOO MADE FOR HORSES HAD MADE MIA'S HAIR SO SILKY-SMOOTH AND LUSTROUS THAT IT RIVALED EVEN THE GREATEST BEAUTIES IN THE EMPIRE.

ALL THAT TALK OF WISDOM AND SAINTLINESS MUST COME FROM FOOLS WHO'VE BEEN BEWITCHED BY HER BEAUTY.

I'VE HEARD SHE FAVORED HER FRIEND'S FATHER WITH A BUSINESS DEAL JUST THE OTHER DAY, IN FACT.

IT SEEMS SHE REALLY IS NOTHING MORE THAN A SELFISH LITTLE GIRL AFTER ALL.

SNEER

ALL I HAVE TO DO IS PRESENT HER WITH A PRODUCT THAT SUITS HER FANCY, AND I'M CERTAIN SHE'LL PLAY RIGHT INTO MY HANDS!

I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT YOUR HIGHNESS IS QUITE FOND OF A NEW HAIRPIN MADE FROM UNICORN'S HORN.

YES, I SUPPOSE SO.

I *HAVE* BEEN WEARING THIS PIN QUITE A LOT, OF LATE.

HEH HEH... EXCELLENT.

IN THAT CASE, PLEASE HAVE A LOOK AT THIS.

SHE MAY BE A PRINCESS, BUT NOT EVEN PRINCESSES ARE ABOVE RECEIVING GIFTS.

ESPECIALLY WHEN SAID GIFT SO RESEMBLES AN ITEM SHE'S TAKEN A LIKING TO LATELY!

I COMMISSIONED A CRAFTSMAN TO CREATE THIS HAIRPIN.

...

SHE'S FALLEN RIGHT INTO MY HANDS!

OH, DOES IT?!

WELL AS IT SO HAPPENS, THIS PIN WAS MADE FROM THE WOOD OF A CERTAIN TREE THAT GROWS IN A PARTICULAR WOODLAND...

DID YOU, NOW...?

THAT DOES INDEED INTEREST ME VERY MUCH.

BEAM

YES, I AM ***VERY*** INTERESTED.

INDEED! IF YOUR HIGHNESS HAPPENS TO BE INTERESTED, THEN PLEASE—

MY, IS THAT SO?

IN FACT, I BELIEVE I WILL GO TAKE A LOOK AT THIS FOREST MYSELF.

...HUH?

I WISH TO DEPART IMMEDI-ATELY.

MAKE THE NECESSARY PREPARA-TIONS.

WHA—

UMM...

BUT—

YOUR HIGHNESS, THERE'S NO NEED FOR YOU TO *PER-SONALLY*—

LUDWIG?

PUSH

BUT...

NO, SHE WON'T.

THERE'S NO WAY SHE COULD **ACTUALLY**—

IF SHE LEAVES NOW, I'LL HAVE NO TIME TO HIDE EVERYTHING THAT MIGHT INCRIMINATE ME!

I-IMMEDI-ATELY?!

BUT...

CAN SHE?

THE THINGS YOU ASK FOR SOMETIMES, YOUR HIGHNESS...

MY, HAVEN'T YOU HEARD?

THEY CALL ME THE SELFISH PRINCESS, YOU KNOW?

STUNNED

...

CLUNK

THUNK

VERY IMPRESSIVE, LUDWIG.

NOT EVEN AN HOUR AFTER I GAVE THE ORDER, WE'RE ALREADY ON THE ROAD.

LUDWIG WAS WELL AWARE OF THE TROUBLE BREWING IN THE BERMAN VISCOUNTY.

THEREFORE, WHEN HE HEARD THE VISCOUNT PLANNED TO VISIT MIA, HE SURMISED SOMETHING UNFORESEEN MAY HAPPEN AND BEGAN PREPARING FOR A TRIP IN ADVANCE.

I MANAGED IT THIS TIME THANKS TO MY PRIOR KNOWLEDGE...

...BUT I DO WISH SHE'D DO A LITTLE MORE TO CLUE ME IN ON HER INTENTIONS.

HAH...

NOT AT ALL.

I LEARN FROM EXPERI-ENCE. DON'T THINK I'VE FORGOT-TEN YOUR UNPLANNED VENTURE INTO THE SLUMS.

THERE ARE TIMES, PERHAPS, WHEN HER GENIUS LEADS HER TO LEAPS OF LOGIC THAT OTHERS CANNOT FOLLOW.

THAT, HOWEVER, IS A PRODUCT OF HER YOUTH.

SHE SIMPLY HAS YET TO REALIZE THAT SHE THINKS SO SWIFTLY, SHE'S ALWAYS A STEP OR TWO AHEAD OF EVERYONE AROUND HER.

...PERHAPS GRASPING HER HIGHNESS'S INTENT IS OUR DUTY AS HER SUBJECTS.

THEN AGAIN...

I HAVE FAITH THAT HER ACTIONS ARE DRIVEN BY WISDOM AND VIRTUE.

SHE'S NOT THE SORT OF PERSON WHO MAKES MISTAKES, AS A RULE.

IF SHE CONTINUES TO GROW AND MATURE, SHE'LL SURELY BE-COME A MOST SAGACIOUS MONARCH INDEED!

LUDWIG'S GLASSES REMAIN AS IMPENETRABLY FOGGED AS EVER.

CONSIDERING THIS IS HER HIGHNESS TALKING...

...I'M SURE SHE KNOWS EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW ALREADY.

AND YET, SHE STILL ASKS TO HEAR IT FROM ME...

WELL THEN, LUDWIG.

I'D APPRECIATE IT IF YOU COULD TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS VISCOUNT BERMAN'S DOMAIN.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, MIA'S THOUGHTS WERE ANKLE-DEEP AT BEST.

JUST IMAGINE THE DEPTHS OF THOUGHT LURKING BEHIND THAT SEEMINGLY VACANT SMILE...

...THAT IS ALL.

OR AT LEAST, THAT IS THE EXTENT OF MY KNOWLEDGE ON THE MATTER.

IN THAT CASE, ALLOW ME TO EXPLAIN.

AT THE MOMENT, VISCOUNT BERMAN IS...

I PRESUME SHE HOPES TO VERIFY THE ACCURACY OF HER INFORMATION AGAINST MINE.

PERHAPS SHE'LL STRIVE TO SORT THROUGH HER THOUGHTS WHILE DISCUSSING HOW TO RESOLVE THE ISSUE NEXT.

QUIVER

M—

DOES YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SITUATION OFFER ANY DISCREPANCIES, YOUR HIGHNESS?

SHUDDER

MERCIFUL MOONS, THAT WAS CLOSE!!!

THIS WHOLE SITUATION IS RIDDLED WITH RED FLAGS!

IN AN INSTANT, MIA REALIZES THAT SHE STANDS BEFORE A CROSSROADS IN HISTORY!

AND ALL OF IT HAPPENING WITH MY EXPLICIT AND PUBLIC APPROVAL...

THE RUDOLVONS' TERRITORY LYING JUST BEYOND THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WOODS...

FORCEFULLY EXPELLING THE LULUS IN ORDER TO DO SO...

CLEARING THE SEALENCE FOREST...

I SAW NO SIGNS OF THAT AT SCHOOL, AND I WAS BAFFLED AS TO HOW IT COULD HAPPEN.

IT DID SAY THAT MY FRIENDSHIP WITH TIONA WAS BOUND TO FALL APART, THIS TIME AROUND.

IT ALL MAKES SENSE NOW, THOUGH...

CLENCH

I'VE READ AND REREAD MY DIARY TIME AFTER TIME, BUT I NEVER RECALLED ANY OF THIS AT ALL...

TO THINK 'ALL OF IT HAS BEEN BREWING UNDER MY NOSE, AND I NEVER EVEN NOTICED!

VISCOUNT BERMAN!

IT'S ALL HIS FAULT!

I ALWAYS KNEW SHE COULD SHOW RIGHTEOUS FURY IN THE FACE OF ARISTOCRATIC TYRANNY...

LUDWIG'S OPINION OF MIA IMPROVED FOR NO GOOD REASON WHATSOEVER!

RUUUMBLE

CUTTING DOWN TREES TO CLEAR LAND ISN'T INHERENTLY BAD, AND IF HE'S DOING IT IN HIS OWN DOMAIN, IT ISN'T REALLY ANY OF OUR BUSINESS.

THE LULUS MAY BE PROTESTING, BUT BETWEEN THEM AND A VISCOUNT, IT'S CLEAR WHO THE EMPIRE'S CENTRAL GOVERNMENT WILL SIDE WITH.

IN ALL PRACTICALITY, PUTTING ALL THE BLAME ON HIM WILL PROVE DIFFICULT.

CURRENTLY, IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT VISCOUNT BERMAN IS AT FAULT, BUT...

THEY'LL NEED A REASON TO WITHDRAW THEM—PEACEFUL RELATIONS BEING RESTORED, FOR INSTANCE.

AS OF YET, I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO COME UP WITH A SOLUTION TO ALL OF THOSE PROBLEMS.

THE MILITARY HAS ALREADY DISPATCHED A CONTINGENT OF SOLDIERS, AS WELL.

BUT WHAT ABOUT HER...?

ALLOW ME TO ASK, YOUR HIGHNESS.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO NOW?

WHAT DO WE DO?

I'M SURE SHE'LL HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS.

WE TEACH THEM A LESSON, OF COURSE!

AND SO...

...AT THE LAST INSTANT BEFORE HISTORY BEGAN TO TRAVEL A VIOLENT PATH...

...MIA ARRIVED TO STEER MATTERS IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION.

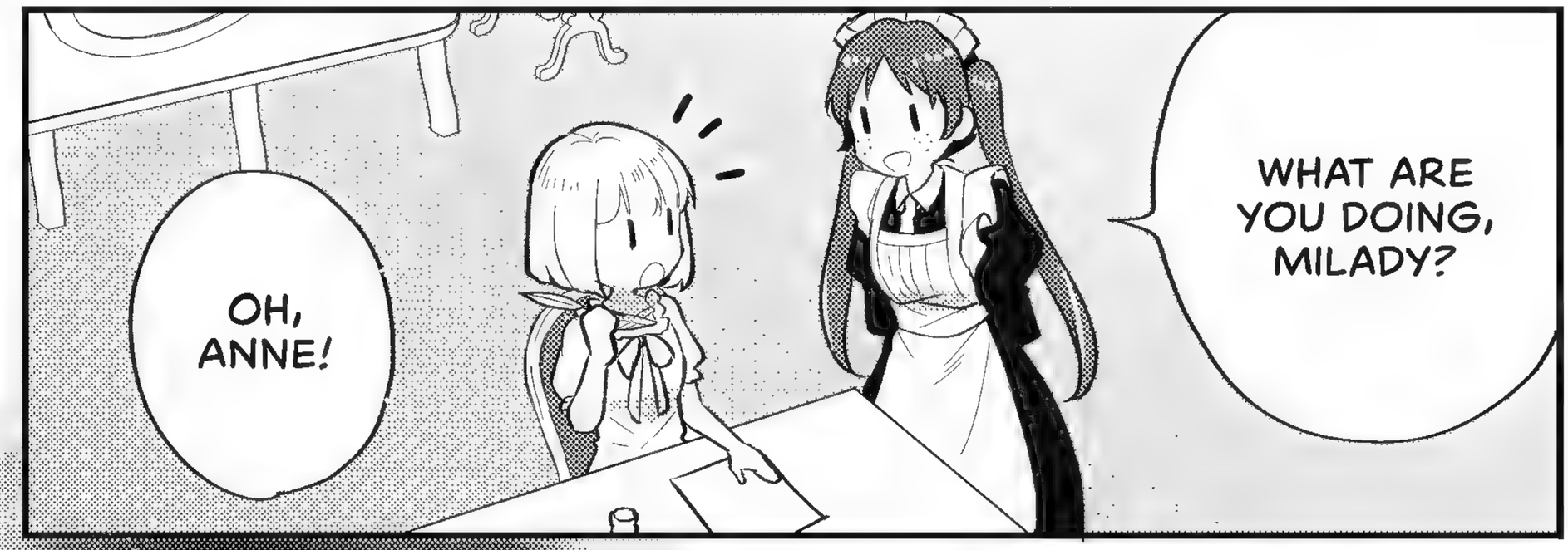
NOW, IN HER RAGE, SHE PREPARES TO CAST THE DICE OF FATE.

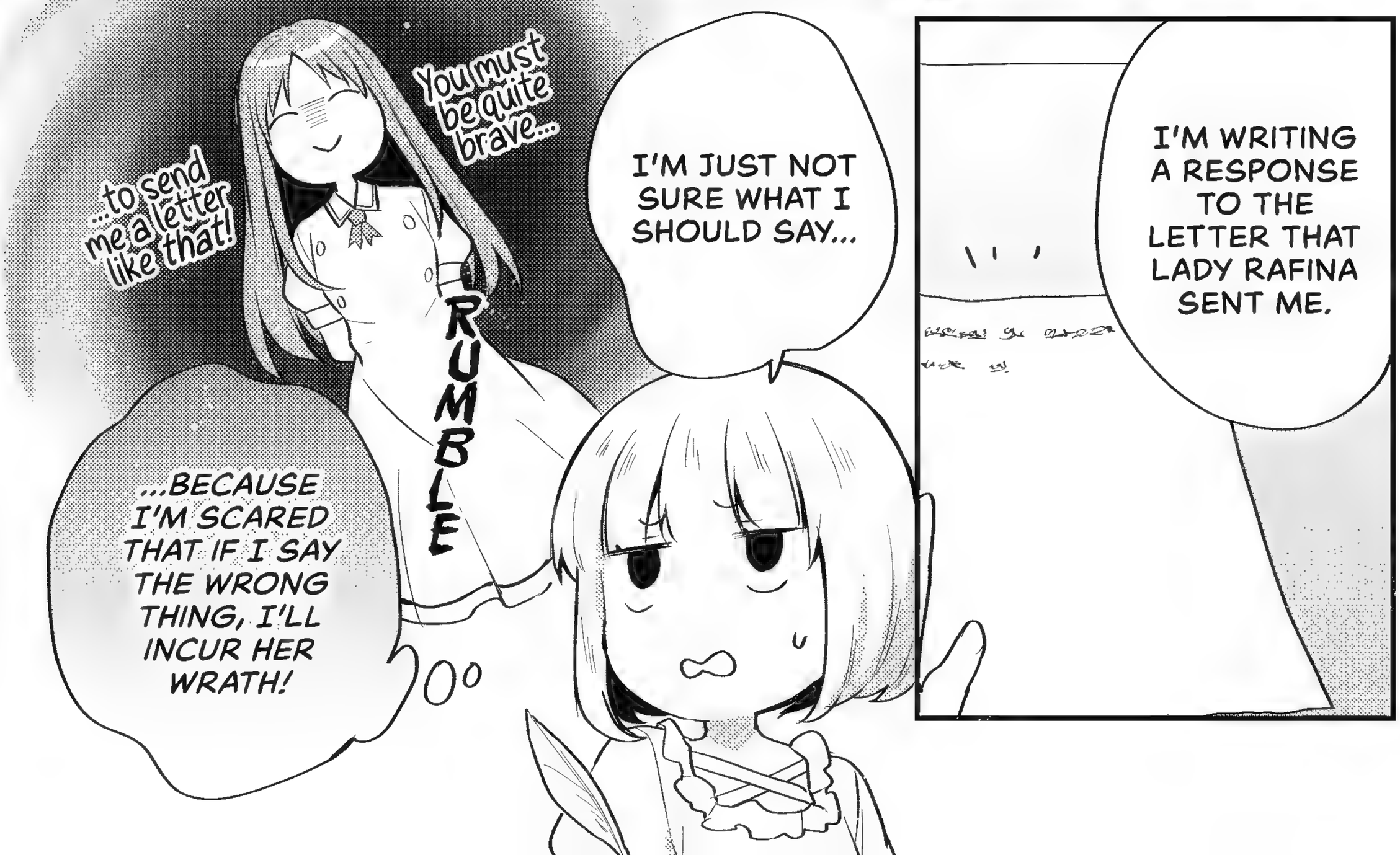
Tearmoon Empire

Tearmoon Empire

Side Story

HMMM...


OH, ANNE!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING, MILADY?


...to send me a letter like that!
You must be quite brave...
RUMBLE
I'M JUST NOT SURE WHAT I SHOULD SAY...
...BECAUSE I'M SCARED THAT IF I SAY THE WRONG THING, I'LL INCUR HER WRATH!
I'M WRITING A RESPONSE TO THE LETTER THAT LADY RAFINA SENT ME.

NO NEED TO OVERTHINK IT! YOU'RE FRIENDS, AREN'T YOU?

YOU COULD TELL HER ABOUT SOMETHING INTEREST-ING THAT HAPPENED RECENTLY, MAYBE...

OR MAYBE YOU COULD WRITE TO HER ABOUT ALL THE BEST SWEETS YOU CAN FIND IN THE EMPIRE!

YOU COULD EVEN SEND HER SOME, AS LONG AS THEY WON'T SPOIL ON THE WAY THERE!

SWEETS... YOU KNOW, THAT'S NOT A BAD IDEA!

AH!

THAT REMINDS ME!

I HAVE SOMETHING ELSE I SHOULD SEND HER AS WELL...

ALLOW ME TO PRESENT TO YOU THIS YEAR'S PORTRAIT.

LADY RAFINA!

THIS IS CERTAINLY, WELL...

AH, I SEE!

UM, WHAT EXACTLY AM I LOOKING AT?

I'VE CHOSEN TO TITLE IT *AN ANGEL'S BENEVOLENCE!*

AN ANGEL...

INDEED...

I GO THROUGH THIS EVERY YEAR.

IF IT BRINGS ANY MEASURE OF SALVATION TO THOSE IN NEED, THEN CERTAINLY, IT'S A WORTHY CAUSE.

EVERY YEAR, THE DUKE OF BELLUGA COMMISSIONED A PORTRAIT OF HIS DAUGHTER, WHICH HE THEN PUT UP FOR SALE THROUGHOUT ALL THE NATIONS SURROUNDING THE PRINCIPALITY.

THE PROFITS GENERATED FROM THEIR SALES WERE USED TO AID THE POOR AND DESTITUTE. HOWEVER...

CRINGE

THE THOUGHT OF HER PORTRAITS SPREADING FAR AND WIDE ACROSS THE LAND INFLICTED INTENSE PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE UPON RAFINA.

BUT IT'S STILL VERY HARD TO STOMACH!

UGH...

BUT FOR ME, THAT'S NOT AN OPTION.

I SUPPOSE A NORMAL GIRL WOULD TALK TO HER FRIENDS, PERHAPS.

I NEVER KNOW HOW TO DISTRACT MYSELF WHEN I GET INTO THESE MOODS.

A LETTER AND A PARCEL FROM THE PRINCESS OF THE TEARMOON EMPIRE HAVE ARRIVED FOR YOU.

!

AFTER ALL, I ONLY HAVE—

Ah!

LADY RAFINA!

!

FROM MIA?!

!

WOULD YOU PLEASE BRING IT TO MY ROOM?

O-OF COURSE!

I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER SEEN LADY RAFINA SMILE LIKE **THAT** BEFORE...

SO THAT'S HOW SHE'S BEEN SPENDING HER SUMMER HOLIDAY SO FAR...

SHE CERTAINLY SOUNDS BUSY.

AND IN SPITE OF THAT, SHE TOOK THE TIME TO REPLY TO MY LETTER.

HM? WHAT ARE THESE LARGER THINGS DOWN...

MAYBE I'LL MAKE SOME TEA AND TRY THEM RIGHT AWAY.

OH! THESE TREATS SHE SENT LOOK DELICIOUS!

FWSH

...BELOW...

?

MIA, OF COURSE, FORGOT TO MENTION THAT THIS WAS A REQUEST FROM HER LOCAL PRIEST.

Only a fool would settle for less than three!

One to display, one for safekeeping, and one in case I need a spare!

M—

MIA WANTS ME TO SIGN MY OWN PORTRAIT...?

A-AND SHE WANTS ***THREE*** OF THEM?

P.S.
IF YOU'D BE SO KIND, IT WOULD MEAN A GREAT DEAL TO ME IF YOU WOULD SIGN THESE PORTRAITS.

SPIN SPIN

IS BUYING PORTRAITS OF YOUR FRIENDS AND ASKING THEM TO SIGN THEM NORMAL?! IS THIS JUST WHAT FRIENDS DO?!

WHA?!

HUH?!

I DON'T GET IT! I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!

I JUST HOPE LADY RAFINA DOESN'T GET UPSET...

NOM NOM

Short Story 1

The Papa Secret: A Mother and Daughter's Shared Happiness

The Papa Secret: A Mother and Daughter's Shared Happiness

The autumn breeze blew gently, rustling the leaves of the trees in the courtyard and wafting its way into the chamber of Adelaide, the Tearmoon Empire's Empress Consort.

Adelaide stifled a yawn as she basked in the refreshingly brisk gust. Her chambers were located in the heart of the Imperial Capital of Lunatear, in a corner of the Whitemoon Palace. Since the room faced the courtyard, each season brought with it a new sort of wind to pay her a visit. There were the peaceful winds of spring, carrying tidings of budding new life; the vibrant winds of summer, amplified as those buds burst into full bloom and breathed vitality into the world around them; the abundant winds of fall, bringing tidings of crimson leaves, ripening fruit, and a world awash with color; and the quiet winds of winter, lulling all and sundry to sleep, where dreams of new life soon to be born awaited.

Adelaide had always loved feeling the changing seasons upon her skin...and she loved them now more than ever. Still lying atop her bed, Adelaide gently stroked her abdomen. She'd always been a slender woman, but at that particular moment, her midsection boasted a distinct but gentle curve. That curve spoke of the new life growing within her...and with each season that passed by, the day she would meet her child grew closer and closer.

"I suppose it will be winter by the time I finally see you," Adelaide whispered with a contented smile.

The wind blew once more through the window, wafting her hair, and at that precise moment, the sound of heavy footsteps rang out from the hallway, growing gradually louder and closer. The wind, it seemed, wasn't alone in choosing to pay Adelaide's room a visit. *This* visitor, however, was hasty, noisy...and more beloved to her than any other. Hence his insistence on seeing her each and every day.

"He's a little earlier than usual today, isn't he?" Adelaide muttered to herself just moments before the door swung open.

"Adela! How are you feeling?" Adelaide's visitor asked after pausing for a moment to catch his breath. His name was Matthias Luna Tearmoon, and he was both her beloved husband and also the sovereign of the whole Tearmoon Empire: the emperor himself.

"Oh, Matty," Adelaide sighed, sounding almost like she was preparing to scold a misbehaving child. "Don't you have duties you're supposed to be attending to?"

"I'm sure the chancellor will take care of anything that arises. My concern for you is far more pressing," Matthias replied, reaching out to gently brush his hand across Adelaide's cheek. She closed her eyes as she felt the warmth of his touch. "Am I imagining it, or do you feel slightly feverish? You're a little flushed too..."

"I'm the same as ever, Matty. Don't worry," Adelaide said, pausing for a moment to chuckle at her husband's concerned frown, then pulling his hand down to her abdomen. "And *she's* feeling fine as well. She's especially full of energy today, in fact. See? You can feel her kicking, can't you?"

"Hmph!" Matthias grunted with a scowl. "How dare she? Nobody is allowed to kick my dear Adela—not even my own daughter!"

"Oh, *Matty*," Adelaide sighed once more, her smile ever so slightly strained. "You should be *happy* that our Mia is so healthy! I only told you because I thought it would please you, and I'd hate to be proven wrong. And besides," she added, her voice taking on a softer tone, "I know very well that you're as excited to meet her as I am."

"W-Well...I suppose I can't deny that I'm *somewhat* looking forward to it," Matthias mumbled, his brow furrowed. "I'm more worried than anything else, but so long as the both of you are safe... or really, so long as *you* are safe, you might say that nothing else especially matters to me..."

Adelaide smiled at him once more. "There's no sense being so pessimistic. Try to think about happier things, such as..." She paused for a moment, pressing a finger to her cheek and slightly cocking her head. Finally, her face lit up and she clapped her hands together. "Oh, of course! Here's something to consider: when our child is born, what will you want her to call you?"

A rather stern look came across Matthias's face. "What should she call me? I believe that goes without saying—I *am* the emperor, and I must be addressed with a title suitable for my status. 'Father,' perhaps... Although on second thought, even if she *is* my daughter, propriety demands she address the emperor with all necessary formalities. It may be best to teach her to refer to me as Your Majesty..."

"Well, *I* want her to call me Mama," said Adelaide.

Matthias looked positively aghast. "*M-Mama*? You want the child of an emperor to use a term so...*lacking* in dignity? How could you suggest something so outrageous?"

Not only was it an absurd proposal from an emperor's perspective, the lesser nobility of the empire would be just as

astonished. Nevertheless, Adelaide was undeterred. "Oh? Is it, truly?" she asked, her smile taking on a mischievous edge. "I simply like how close it would make the two of us feel. Wouldn't you like it if she called you Papa, as well?"

"P-P-P...*Papa*?!" Matthias exclaimed as he reeled backward, his eyes spinning about from the sheer shock of it all. "No, I couldn't... Adela, that's simply not— I am the *emperor*! I have an *image* to preserve, as a ruler *and* as her father, you might say. I could never possibly..."

"Oh?" said Adelaide with a raised eyebrow. "I don't recall saying anything about her calling you Papa in *public*. Imagine, for instance... at mealtimes, perhaps. We could always ensure that we eat together, and have her call you Papa only during those family moments."

"But...even if we *are* family, eating together is hardly proper... In fact, it might be outright unprecedented..."

"Are you *truly* certain about that?" Adelaide asked. "Do you *really* want your adorable daughter to constantly stand on ceremony, never calling you anything more affectionate than 'Your Majesty'?"

"Th-This isn't about what I *want*," Matthias countered. "I am the emperor! I stand at the top of this empire's peerage! I simply *must* present myself with the dignity that station calls for," he said, his expression once again carrying that classic sense of stiff formality.

Adelaide let out an exasperated chuckle, then forced herself into a deadpan. "Very well, then. In that case, I shall have her call me 'mama,' and you are free to do as you please...*Your Majesty*."

"Wha— A-Adela, please! Why would *you* treat me so formally?!" Matthias babbled in a panic as he clung to his wife.

Adelaide stuck her tongue out at him. "Oho ho ho," she chuckled, "it was a *joke*, Matty. But the point I hoped to make is that, considering our daughter is sure to be *far* more lovable than I am, I

know for a fact that you'll find yourself wanting her to call you papa before you know it."

"You *have* always made a habit of predicting these things. We don't *really* even know for sure that our child will be a girl yet, if you'll recall. Honestly," Matthias said with a shake of his head before suddenly putting on an elated smile. "But, you know... Heh heh heh! I think you may find your prediction far off the mark this time, Adela. After all, you could search for an eternity and never find a girl more loveable than you are! Our daughter will be no exception, I assure you." A moment later, he crossed his arms and sank into thought. "*Papa*, though? Hmmm... My daughter, a girl adorable in much the same way my beloved wife is, calling me papa... But what of my stately dignity? *Papa*, though... Hmm."

As Adelaide watched Matthias seriously ponder his options, the autumn wind blew once more. It wrapped the two of them in its comforting embrace, and time passed by in gentle, peaceful silence.

Adelaide had a clear vision in mind of the happy family they would become. A papa, a mama, and their adorable daughter...an imperial family living in perfect, heartwarming harmony. Her vision, however, would not come to pass. Before Mia was grown—before she had even said her first word—Adelaide had already passed from this world.

And so time marched on...

The Whitemoon Palace featured a chamber known as the White Night Dining Hall. That hall was where the imperial family of the Tearmoon Empire took their meals. It had been quite some time since Mia had had the chance to eat there, and her heart danced with glee as she sat down before its extravagant dinner table.

"Hah hah hah! It's been so very long since we had a chance to eat together, hasn't it?" Mia's father, Matthias, said with an ebullient smile. "How has Saint-Noel been treating you? Have you been lonely, eating all of your meals without me?"

"School has been going well, and you needn't worry about me, Your Majesty. I've had no problems of the sort," Mia replied in a flat, expressionless drone.

Matthias let out a groan. "How many times have I told you, Mia? Call me father—or, if you'd rather, you can feel free to call me papa instead..."

"Yes, of course. I am well aware, *father*," said Mia, casually ignoring the latter half of Matthias's request as she waited for dinner to arrive. It had been an age since she'd been able to eat the palace's head chef's cooking, and she had spent the better part of the trip home fantasizing about the feast he would serve her. *Will it be much longer?* she wondered, glancing impatiently toward the kitchen as she spoke on. "And furthermore, umm...what were we discussing? The meals at Saint-Noel?"

Matthias's face lit up in an instant. "Yes, please! I would love to hear about them!" he exclaimed. He'd been sulking away up until just a moment ago, but now he was so obviously ecstatic Mia wouldn't have been surprised if he started humming to himself. She couldn't help but let out a chuckle as she watched his antics.

"All right, then," Mia said. "There's so much that I could tell you about, but I suppose one thing that I found especially striking was eating with everyone else in my class."

Saint-Noel Academy was a boarding school. All of its students resided within its walls, and being as many of those students were the sons and daughters of nobility from the surrounding nations, they were offered the freedom to take their meals whensoever they

pleased. The makeup of the meals themselves was, for the most part, up to the students to choose as well.

There was, however, one exception: once a week, on a day considered holy, all of Saint-Noel's students had dinner together. The seating chart on those days would change on occasion, as well. Sometimes students would be seated by class, sometimes by club, sometimes by nation of origin—the school cycled through a wide variety of systems. The goal of the exercise was to expose the students of the school to a wide variety of people and cultures while they were still young, encouraging them to learn the value that lay in others' ways of life. At an institution such as theirs, friendships forged during one's school years could very literally prevent wars in the distant future...or at least, such was the hope of the school's administration.

All motives behind the practice aside, the meals that Mia had taken with her own class had proven to be particularly impactful for her. In the previous timeline, Mia had spared virtually no consideration for any of her classmates, Sion aside. As a result, it wasn't until her *second* round through academia that a thought struck her.

My! There really are all sorts of people in my class, aren't there? Mia thought to herself. Imperials only made up a small percentage of her classmates. There were students from Sunkland, from Belluga, and from a wide variety of surrounding nations as well, all the children of influential individuals. The class's makeup was downright diverse.

At first, Mia's only goal at school had been to forge connections and prepare herself for the possible revolution that loomed in the future. Gradually, however, she began to take an interest in her classmates as individuals, and as a result, Mia was struck with yet

another newfound revelation. *Perhaps I never paid much attention to others during my first lifetime,* she reflected. Correcting that one simple mistake had already paid significant dividends.

Mia smiled with satisfaction as she reflected upon her time at school—and as a platter of delectable-looking hors d'oeuvres was placed upon the table. As she reached out with her fork, however, she happened to glance up and find her father staring at her, his brow furrowed.

"Hmm... I hate to even consider the possibility, but...Mia, have any *boys* caught your attention?" asked Mia's father. "That is to say, have you met any who struck you as...well, certainly not *equal* to me, but at least worthy of comparison...?"

"Oho ho ho! Oh, father, how you jest," said Mia, brushing the question off even as a certain young man's face flashed into her mind. A face, and a name—the name of the boy who, according to the diary entries she'd read during the carriage ride home, would one day risk his life fighting for her sake... "I'm sure I shall have such thoughts eventually, but I'm also sure that won't be for quite some time still. Perhaps ten years from now, or so?"

Suddenly, Mia found herself imagining her own wedding day. She imagined a future in which she had *not* met her end at the blade of the guillotine and thus had managed to claim true and lasting happiness.

I suppose it should be no surprise that I can hardly imagine it all, as of yet, Mia reflected. *If the day does come that I find such happiness, though...perhaps I'll find it in myself to call him papa, just the once.*

Mia looked up once more, only to find...

"My Mia, meeting a man...? No, surely it's still too soon? But then again, if she really *were* to find a boy who catches her interest, this might be my chance to get my hands on him and ensure he's

forged into a man who's worthy of her... Though on the other hand... Mnh..."

...her father, muttering to himself with a tormented frown on his face. It was so comical, Mia simply couldn't stop herself from laughing.

This was the happy family that Adelaide had wished for. Her child couldn't have both of her parents there for her, granted...but nevertheless, her far-flung prediction had been proven correct. There sat a father so hopelessly doting that he desperately longed for his daughter to call him papa, and a daughter who *did* adore her father deep down, but would never call him papa so long as she lived. The warmth that enveloped their dining table was precisely what Adelaide had foreseen.

Mia had never known why her father was so preoccupied by the thought of her calling him papa. She had no idea that her own mother had been the origin of that particular form of happiness, but in spite of her ignorance, she had very much carried it forward into the future. She was right there with her father, smiling and jesting as they shared a meal, so happy together that she *almost* felt the urge to call her nuisance of a father "papa," just like he so persistently desired. And, in truth, the happy future that Mia imagined and the one that her mother had aspired to reach bore a remarkable resemblance to each other.

As to whether or not that happiness would ever come to pass... Mia, at least, still hadn't the foggiest idea.

Tearmoon Empire

Short Story 2

The Last Supper: Salty Stew and Cold Cuisine

The Last Supper:
Salty Stew and Cold Cuisine

The following is but the smallest glimpse into a single instant of the future—an ephemeral episode depicted in only the briefest, most sparing of terms in a bloodstained diary.

The head chef of the Whitemoon Palace, Musta Waggman, unhurriedly knocked on the door before him. It was a thick, sturdy door, flanked by soldiers—Sunklanders who had been dispatched to the empire—on either side. Musta didn't spare them so much as a glance as he opened the door and stepped into the room.

"Pardon my intrusion, Princess Mia," he said. "Your supper is ready."

Within the room was a single girl: Mia Luna Tearmoon. As the child of the emperor, she once stood at the peak of the nation's peerage, but she had fallen far since those halcyon days, and for the past three years had been treated as nothing more than a common criminal awaiting her execution.

"My... Is it that time already...?" Mia mumbled as she turned her gaze to her window. The streets of the imperial capital beyond were bathed in the red glow of sunset, and after spending just a moment watching the people who walked along them, Mia turned away once more and closed the book she'd been holding. It was a diary, specifically—one she'd been writing in on a daily basis since she was young. The good and the bad, memories of joyful times and

memories of tragic ones—she made a point of recording all of it within that volume's pages.

"To think that this is the last sunset I shall ever see... It's, well... somewhat moving, I suppose," Mia muttered, seemingly to herself, then finally turned to look at Musta. "I am in your care, Head Chef."

"Much obliged, Your Highness. It is an honor to be called upon to prepare your supper this evening, and I swear that I will do so to the utmost of my ability," said Musta, choking back a surge of emotion as he bowed deeply. Tomorrow, Mia would be sent to the guillotine. Tonight, then, would be the last supper she would ever partook.

In truth, Musta had never wished to be granted an honor like this. He would have much preferred to continue serving the imperial family for the rest of his working life, then pass on the position of head chef to one of his promising protégés. He wanted to prepare his final supper for the princess on *his* terms, not on those of the revolutionary army. Alas, it was simply not meant to be...

Musta clenched his teeth as he departed from the room without another word. The burning frustration he felt only lasted for an instant, though. Before he knew it, he'd shifted gears. If all he could do was cook for her, then it was his duty to ensure that her final meal was as glorious and lavish as he could possibly make it.

"My... This is practically a feast," Mia said, her eyes wide as she looked over the spread that Musta had laid out on her table. The appetizers were mouthwatering at a glance, consisting of a smoked fish terrine, slices of greenmoon melon topped with ham, a loaf of delectably soft bread, and a carefully stewed redmoon pumpkin soup.

"This is only the first course, Your Highness," Musta said with a gentle smile. "I've done my utmost to ensure that your meal today is all that you could hope for and more."

"Well, I could hardly be more excited! Oho ho ho... My tongue is practically dancing with anticipation," Mia said, returning Musta's smile with one of her own...but a moment later, a gloom fell over her expression. "Though, I must say...it's a bit of a shame to partake of such a banquet all on my own."

Mia's gaze drifted to the other side of the table. That was where her father, a man who looked forward to his dinners with his daughter more than anything else, *would* have sat...but he was nowhere to be seen.

Your Majesty... Musta thought. He felt a hint of the same loneliness that Mia was feeling. The emperor, Matthias Luna Tearmoon, had been executed some time ago. The empire's good-natured ruler, that man who had never attended a dinner party he didn't enjoy to the fullest, would never share a table with anyone again.

"Father, and Anne, and Abel too... They're all gone," Mia murmured.

Anne, the maid who had served Mia since her childhood, was nowhere to be found as well. She and Abel Remno, a classmate and friend of Mia's from her time at Saint-Noel, had both attempted to rescue the princess...and had both failed. Anne had been captured and imprisoned, while Abel had been struck down.

"The only one left who might come to see me now is Ludwig... but he's so terribly busy," Mia continued.

She had spoken with Ludwig a few days beforehand and had asked that he do his best to help make her maid-in-waiting Anne's punishment as light as possible. She knew that her own execution

was unavoidable, but she had begged him to ensure that Anne, at the very least, would be spared.

"It *does* seem like a terrible shame to have my final dinner alone, though... Ah, of course!" Mia exclaimed, then turned to Musta. "What about you? Would the head chef care to share a meal with me this evening?"

Musta, who had been caught entirely off guard by the proposal, frantically shook his head. "I couldn't possibly! I'd never even dream of such a thing," he protested.

"Oh, come now," Mia said, then paused. "Unless, perhaps, you would be in trouble if anyone learned you had shared a meal with me?"

Musta took a moment to consider her question. Mia was a prisoner, awaiting her execution. It was indeed true that he might be faulted for dining with her, and yet... *Why should I care what others think?* he thought to himself, then looked Mia in the eye. He gazed at the imperial princess he'd watched over for years on end, all throughout her youth. She'd grown into an adult—into a beautiful young woman—but all too soon, her life would be snatched away from her. He looked his doomed mistress in the eye...

"Not at all. Taste-testing is one of a head chef's solemn duties, and no one would protest if I were to do so," Musta said definitively. Then he bowed deeply and continued, "Unworthy of the honor though I am, if you would have me, Your Highness...I would gladly dine with you."

"Very good! Please do, then," Mia said with a happy clap of her hands. "Oho ho ho! My, how terribly long it's been since I've had the chance to share a meal with anyone!"

And so Mia's quiet, peaceful final supper began. It was a somewhat busy affair, with her dining partner having to jump

between cooking and eating at a moment's notice, but Mia paid no mind to it and savored every dish with a smile. In fact, she devoured them! Mia drank up every drop of soup that was served to her, asked for a second helping, and then went on to shovel the fish she was served into her mouth without even waiting for it to cool down to a less than scalding temperature.

At that point, Mia looked over toward her head chef once more. "You never fail to astonish me with your skill in the kitchen, truly. These dishes have all been superb."

"I'm honored, Your Highness. The position of head chef of the Whitemoon Palace is one that should only be filled by the most capable chef in the empire, and I have trained day and night to ensure that I am worthy of the position," Musta said with a bow. Then, he brought his next dish, which Mia was rather familiar with, to the table.

"Oh...did you...?" Mia said as she caught sight of the dish, her eyes widening. Then, for the first time in a very long while, she found herself laughing from the bottom of her heart. "Oho ho... Oho ho ho ho! You really did! Ambermoon tomato stew! My...how terribly nostalgic a dish this is. I'm sure you remember how I loathed it when I was a child," she continued, then scooped up a spoonful of the soup. "I suppose it was the acidity? Or perhaps its acrid bite... I could never put my finger on what it was about the flavor that bothered me so, but in any case, I simply couldn't stand it."

Mia smiled mischievously and shot Musta a look. "Do you remember what I said back then? I told you that you were not to serve me ambermoon tomatoes under any circumstances, and yet without fail, I would always find this stew upon my table. I can't tell you how many times I contemplated showing you the door when I was young," she said, then took a bite and grinned. "Ah, yes—it truly is

exquisite. The extended stewing softens the tomatoes so thoroughly, they practically fall apart of their own volition. The other vegetables too—they're all so very tender... I understand now, you know. I know very well how much effort it takes to produce a dish like this..."

"I'm pleased to hear it, Your Highness," said Musta.

And then...a moment passed by in silence, broken only by the sound of the two diners enjoying their stew. Until, that is, Musta suddenly mumbled.

"Though, now that I taste it...I believe...I may have failed to season this dish properly," he said.

"Hmm?" Mia grunted.

"It's ever so slightly too sharply flavored... Oversalted, I believe."

Mia cocked her head and looked down at her spoon in confusion. "My, is it? I thought it was delicious," she said, then took another bite. "Yes, as I thought! It really is...ah."

At that point, Mia seemed to realize something and trailed off mid-sentence. A moment later, she offered Musta one of the napkins that had been laid out on the table. His emotions, it seemed, had gotten the better of him, and his cheeks were damp with tears.

"The salt in your stew is proof of how well you've treated me over the years," Mia said as she turned to look out the window. She gazed far off into the distance—searching for a time that had long since been lost, perhaps, or for the figures of all the people who had been dear to her, but were now gone for good. "I...cannot say that everything turned out for the best," she continued, "but at the very least, I am quite certain that not firing you was an excellent decision."

Mia looked Musta squarely in the eye, her expression sober as could be...and bowed.

"Thank you, head chef...Musta Waggman. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for everything you have done for me. I do not

believe it sufficient to repay the loyalty you have offered me, but I have asked Ludwig to ensure you are granted a reward to thank you for your service. I would be most pleased if you would accept it."

"I am unworthy of your words. Princess Mia...serving you for all these years...was truly an honor..."

Musta fell to his knees, bowing deeply, and Mia smiled sadly.

"I do believe I've spoiled the mood, haven't I?" she said. "Come now, stand up! Our meal will grow cold, at this rate."

"Forgive my impertinence...but I endeavor to ensure that the food I make will still satisfy, even if eaten cold. As such, I hope you will enjoy it down to the very last bite," said Musta.

It took Mia a moment to realize that he was joking. When she finally did, however, her eyes widened and she burst into laughter.

Such was the tear-stained reality of the world depicted in Mia's diary. Abel was slain, Anne imprisoned...it was a future defined by Mia's failure. For her, it was a tragic, lonely existence...but within all that sadness, just a hint of warmth still remained, right up until the moment she met her end. Whether she will meet that same end once more, or otherwise find a new path forward, still has yet to be determined.

And so time marched on...

Mia had finally arrived home from Saint-Noel. Her diary had scared her half to death over the course of her journey, and the cartsickness had nearly finished the job, but she'd bounced back in short order and was now happily enjoying her dinner.

"Oho ho ho! I see our cooks' skills are as polished as ever. This ambermoon tomato stew never fails to impress, no matter how many times I have it! Compliments to the chef indeed!"

It had been some time since Mia had eaten ambermoon tomato stew, and its flavor was exactly as rich and deep, its vegetables as melt-in-your-mouth tender and faintly, perfectly sweet as she'd remembered. It really was superb, and while Saint-Noel's cooks were certainly no slouches, they fell several levels short of the Whitemoon Palace's head chef's work.

"Yes...it truly is wonderful. Something about eating this drives in the fact that I've truly returned home," Mia muttered as she savored her meal...then noticed that she was being subjected to a *very* thorough bout of scrutiny, courtesy of her father. "Wh-What is it, father? Why are you glaring at me like that?"

"Oh! I was just, well... I simply wondered if you were planning on carrying on with what you were telling me about earlier," said Mia's father. "You know, about how you may, perhaps, have met a boy who caught your interest in some manner...?"

Oh, I see. This is going to be an enormous nuisance, Mia realized. She'd been enjoying the opportunity to savor her head chef's cooking once more, and had put her conversation with her father entirely on the backburner in the process. This, she decided, was the right time to be honest, albeit also ever so slightly harsh.

"Pardon me, father," said Mia. "I am perfectly willing to tell you all about it, of course, but *after* we've finished our meal. You should know better than to let your food go cold, shouldn't you? Our head chef has gone out of his way to serve it to us hot and fresh, and it would be a terrible shame to allow it to go unappreciated...wouldn't it?" she added, turning to give the head chef a somewhat mischievous smile. However...

"Not at all, Your Highness," the head chef replied. "Forgive my impertinence, but I endeavor to ensure that the food I make will still satisfy, even if eaten cold."

Matthias hadn't expected the head chef to support his case, but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. "See? You heard the man! Our head chef's skills are indisputable! Moreover, what better to accompany a meal than some rousing conversation, don't you think?" he asked with a smirk that got *right* under Mia's skin... until, that is, she recalled what she'd read in her diary before.

I suppose that is *fair enough,* she thought. *I'll be avoiding* that *topic to the bitter end, but there's no guaranteeing how much longer I'll be able to dine with my father like this...*

Mia let out a heavy sigh. "As I said earlier, I do *not* have any such special gentleman in my life at the moment. This conversation is *over.* Instead, allow me to tell you about some of the many experiences I've had during my time at Saint-Noel."

"Oh, stories of your time at school? Yes, please do! Hee hee, I can hardly wait!"

As she watched her father laugh, his smile as big and bright as could be, Mia couldn't stop herself from laughing right along with him.

♦ Afterword ♦

We're getting an anime adaptation! Hurray!

This is the author of the original novels, Nozomu Mochitsuki.

But anyway—an anime adaptation, seriously! Woohoo! I believe this is all thanks to the efforts of the illustrator of the novels, Gilse, as well as the creator of the manga adaptation, Mizu Morino.

Thank you so much for making Mia look like such an adorable, energetic girl, and for portraying the sheer speed with which Li'l Guill chases after her!

I would also like to offer my gratitude to the readers who have supported this series so passionately. I hope you'll cheer Mia on as she takes a leap from the page to the screen!

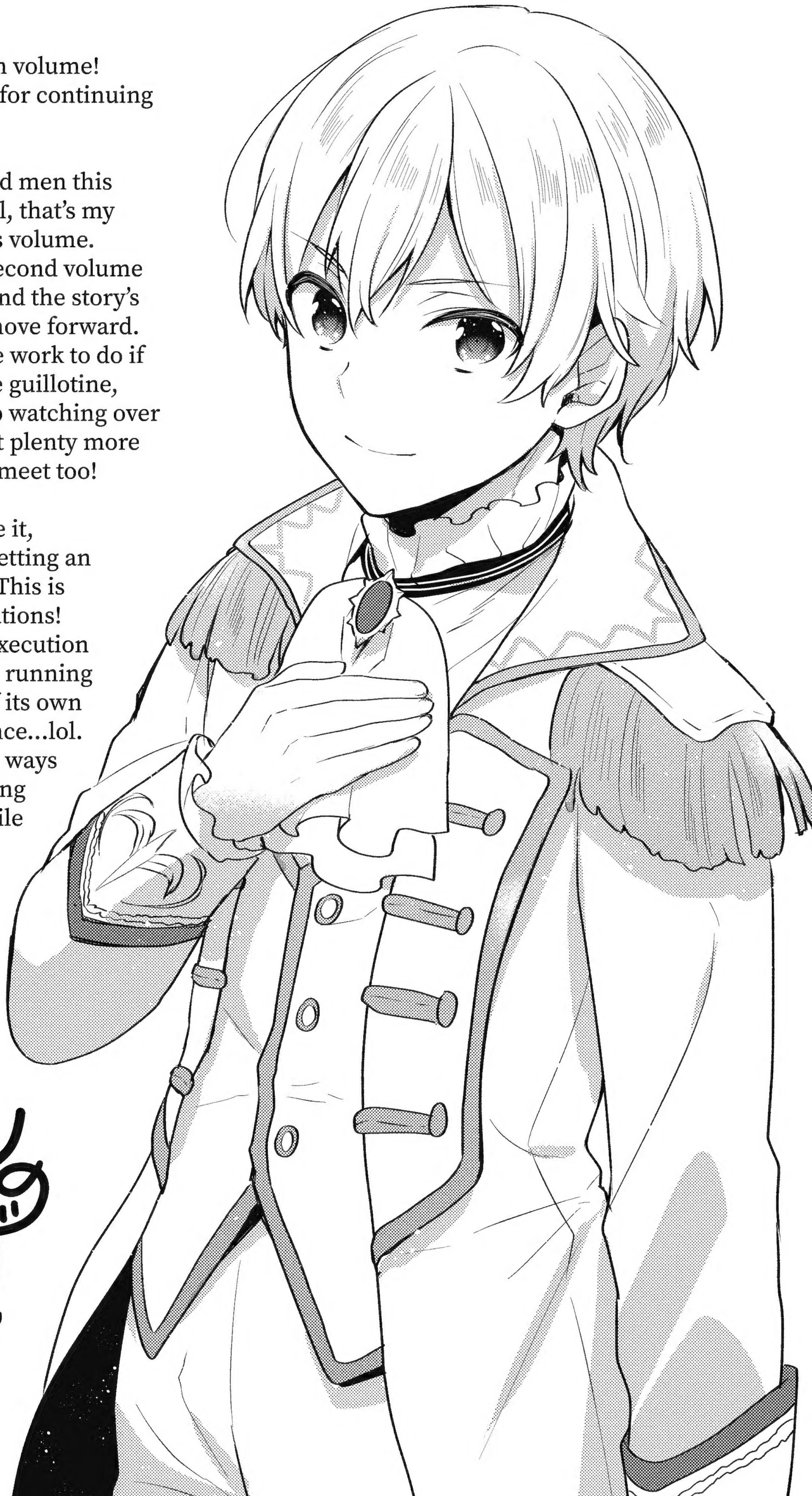
Nozomu Mochitsuki

Here we are in the fifth volume!
Thank you very much for continuing to read this series.

I got to draw tons of old men this time around! And, well, that's my big takeaway from this volume.
We've made it to the second volume of the original work, and the story's gradually starting to move forward.
Mia still has a lot more work to do if she wants to dodge the guillotine, though, so please keep watching over her with me! We've got plenty more new characters left to meet too!

Also, if you can believe it, Tearmoon Empire is getting an anime adaptation!!!!!! This is incredible! Congratulations!
I wonder if a certain execution implement that's been running around with a mind of its own will make an appearance...lol.
The broadcast is still a ways away, but I'll be plugging away at the manga while I eagerly await it!

That's all for now!
See you in volume 6!



~Mizu Morino

TEARMOON EMPIRE (MANGA) VOLUME 5
by Nozomu Mochitsuki (story) and Mizu Morino (artwork)
Original character designs by Gilse

Translated by Tristan K. Hill
Edited by Samantha J. Moore
Lettered by Meiru

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